

### **REVIEWS**

B&W 700 Series Hitachi 75in TV NAD T 777 V3 Atmos receiver LG UP970 4K Blu-ray player Denon X8500H AV amplifier

# EXTREME EXCELLENCE



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# Welcome

How many speakers does your home cinema setup have? I'm sure if I'd asked that question a decade ago the answer would have most likely been 'five', or maybe 'seven'. Fast-forward to 2018 and we're



auditioning a Denon AV amplifier (see page 52) that suggests you might want to pepper your listening room with 13 speakers.

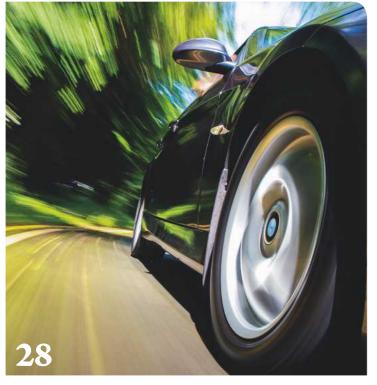
I can see the attraction. The Dolby Atmos and DTS:X formats have opened a new world of immersive surround sound, where additional speakers can be put to good use to cocoon you in a thrilling aural bubble.

But I also love 'vanilla' 5.1 audio, and this issue's 700 Series system from Bowers & Wilkins (see page 48) is a fine example of such a soundscape writ large. And deep. And detailed. And rich. It's not a budget package by any stretch, nor designed for a 'regular' living space, but is proof that you don't always need more of everything...

> Mark Craven Editor



# 









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John Archer: The experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Jon Thompson: Film producer and post-production expert delves into Hollywood and AV



Steve May: HCC's former Ed. is one of the UK's most respected AV journos



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**Richard Stevenson:** Former Editor of the UK CE trade journal *ERT* 



Ed Selley: Audiophile Ed mixes his home cinema passion with a love of vinyl



Vincent Teoh: Professional video calibrator writes about technology and tweaking

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# BULLETIN

→ NEWS HIGHLIGHTS OPTOMA Budget beamer targets 1080p cinephiles B&O OLED TV gets a retro revamp DC HEROES Comic book king takes up London residence SKY Sir David Attenborough boosts VR plans WEBWATCH Trailers and tech NEWS X10 AV stories in bite-sized chunks THE GREATEST SHOWMAN Plan your Blu-ray singalong & MORE!

# For your Reference

The CI516OREF-THX mounts

KEF has added an in-wall speaker to its Reference range, featuring drivers especially designed for its flush-fit form factor. Dubbed the Ci5160REF-THX (and THX Ultra certified), the metre-long speaker uses a quartet of 6.25in woofers and a single Uni-Q unit, fed by 'high-grade' crossover networks claiming a smooth response with minimal distortion. Priced at £7,500, each model comes with a certificate signed by the audio craftsman who built it – order one now and it'll be ready in a couple of weeks...

to a depth of 99mm

### **HCC ONLINE...**

For breaking AV news, blogs, features and reviews visit www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag
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### Elipson plays the music



Elipson is shipping the latest edition of its Music Centre – dubbed the Black Edition – with a Chromecast

Audio dongle to complement its aptX Bluetooth streaming feature and physical analogue and digital inputs. This black satin-finished cylindrical system hub also integrates a 2 x 120W ICE power amplifier stage to drive partnering speakers (plus a subwoofer output with adjustable low-pass filter), and a CD player and DAB/FM tuner. Pricing is around £900. www.elipson.com/en

### Put a projector in your pocket



Weighing just 750g and measuring 18cm wide, Vivitek's Qumi Q38 claims to offer 'the largest projection display size yet in

1080p resolution' for a projector of its size – namely an image that can hit 130in from a 3.5m throw – plus an LED lamp-life rating of 30,000 hours. Available for around £600, this pocket PJ features a single HDMI input, dual USB ports, and wireless hookup to mirror smart devices and PCs/Macs. On-the-go use is aided by an onboard two-hour-rated battery. www.vivitek.eu

### Playlist....

Team *HCC* spins up its disc

### Thor: Ragnarok (Ultra HD Blu-ray)

While we may have some concerns regarding the Atmos mix, there's still plenty to savour about this visually spectacular and extremely funny Marvel sequel in 4K.

### Score (R2 DVD)



Matt Schrader's documentary charts the development of the modern movie score over the decades. Fascinating stuff.

## Professor Marston and the Wonder Women (R2 DVD)



Playful biopic dealing with the unconventional love life of the man who created Wonder Woman.

### Goodbye Christopher Robin (All-region BD)



A tough watch made all the more bearable by the superb 1080p encode it receives on Blu-ray.

#### Dogs (Region B BD



The UK Blu-ray debut of this enjoyably silly 1976 revenge-ofnature flick is thankfully no dog...

## Sky relaunches VR app

Sir David Attenborough enlisted for a virtual night at the museum

HCC tried the

Sky is rebooting its VR app this Spring and has enlisted Sir David Attenborough for its most ambitious project yet. *Hold The World*, produced in partnership with the Natural History Museum, invites VR viewers to take a closer look at some of the museum's most popular exhibits, including a blue whale, stegosaurus, trilobite and pterosaur, with Sir David as their personal guide.

Sky CEO Stephen van Rooyen says the project puts his company at the 'leading edge' of VR technologies. 'This is a brand-new experience.'

Once users enter the VR museum, they can choose a route to the Conservation Centre, the Earth Sciences Library or the Cryptogamic Herbarium. In each Sir David is on hand to relate in-depth info. Once a full examination has taken place, the object 'comes to life.' The average VR experience typically lasts between 20 minutes and an hour.

VR experience on Oculus Rift, and enjoyed both the resolution of the image, and the

level of interaction offered. You can expand or contract objects virtually in size, spinning them around for a detailed look in ways that are simply not possible in the real world.

For the experience, developers Factory 42 created a photorealistic 'behind-the-scenes' in which VR users can venture deep into the museum to discover exhibits. The museum's CT scanning department was responsible for creating the scientifically accurate models and animation.

The virtual Attenborough, meanwhile, was created at Microsoft HQ and required more than 100 cameras to photograph him from every angle. Hair is a problem for volumetric capture, he reveals. 'I had to spray down every wisp, else there would have been a hole in my head.'

Attenborough has long pioneered new broadcast technologies, from introducing colour TV as controller of BBC2 and pioneering programme content in HD, 3D and 4K.

### **VR for VIPs**

Hold the World is Sky VR Studio's first fully-interactive production and will be available to Sky customers when the Sky VR app is relaunched as part of the broadcaster's new Sky VIP customer loyalty programme. The experience will be available on Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear VR and Google Daydream, but not PlayStation VR.

Sky says it will follow with new VR content on a monthly basis across different genres. Upcoming experiences will focus heavily on sport, including football action and a ringside encounter featuring Anthony Joshua. There will also be a VR behind-thescenes special for *Britannia* (see p96), and a fully narrative VR episode of Italian drama *Gomorrah*, written especially for the technology.

Attenborough has pioneered HD, 3D, 4K and now VR  $\,$ 

### At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick? Catch these this month

### **Avengers: Infinity War**



April 26: A decade of Marvel Studios movies has been leading to this: the biggest and most spectacular superhero film ever made. Turn to p22 to find out why we're so excited...

### The Strangers: Prey at Night

May 04: Mad Men's Christina Hendricks stars in (and Johannes Roberts directs) this belated sequel to the 2008 home invasion horror flick, which finds the masked maniacs stalking a family at a secluded trailer park.

### How to Talk to Girls at Parties



May 11: Elle Fanning, Alex Sharp and Nicole Kidman appear in this sci-fi comedy (based on a Neil Gaiman short story) about an alien visitor who learns about teenage love during a visit to London in the 1970s.



A cinema in Zurich has become the first in the world to officially install a Samsung Cinema LED screen, news that has the Korean corp boldly claiming: 'The movie screen and traditional projection technology are a thing of the past.'

Samsung's next-gen cinema display features 24million LEDs, using a modular construction to fill an area measuring 10.2m wide and 5.4m high.

While in essence a giant TV, it's certified by the DCI (Digital Cinema Initiative) and delivers a  $4,096 \times 2,160 \text{ 4K}$  resolution.

### **Exit light**

The benefits of this projector-less approach are numerous, believes Samsung. An absence of light reflections enables 'pitch dark' theatres, in addition to 'true' blacks on screen. Switching between aspect ratios is achievable without masking technologies.

Cinema LED also delivers 'unprecedented colour brilliance, luminosity and sharpness,' says the company. The screen's extreme contrast makes it a suitable partner for HDR, with its LED illumination delivering a brightness of 146fL (approximately 500 nits), around 10 times that of a conventional projector-based theatre. 3D playback is also on tap.

The screen is also designed for 24/7 operation and prepared for 'secondary uses', says Samsung, allowing cinema owners to explore new revenue models.

Another benefit of removing a projector from a cinema is the scope to rethink interior design, now that there's no pesky light beam to contend with. 'We have removed the complete furnishings, implemented an innovative seating concept and consequently are providing the audience with the ultimate cinematic experience,' says Edi Stöckli, owner of Zurich's Arena Cinemas Sihlcity where the screen has been put into action. (If you find yourself nearby and fancy checking it out, book a ticket for Screen 5).

Partnering the Cinema LED screen is JBL's new Sculpted Surround system, which aims to deliver a greater sweetspot. JBL, a division of Harman, is now owned by Samsung.

Says Daniel Périsset, Samsung Electronics Switzerland: '[We] always try to go the hilt and advance technological progress to make life easier for people and enrich their lives. We have once again succeeded in doing this with the new Cinema LED Screen. We're already looking forward to the use of the screens in other movie theatres.'

The TK800 is BenQ's most affordable

### Cutting the cost of 4K projection

BenO's TK800 beamer goes on sale at a wallet-friendly £1,200

The arrival of Texas Instruments' 4K DLP solution was always tipped to dramatically lower the entry price of UHD home cinema projection.

BenQ's TK800, available now for £1,200, is proof that such claims weren't wide of the mark.

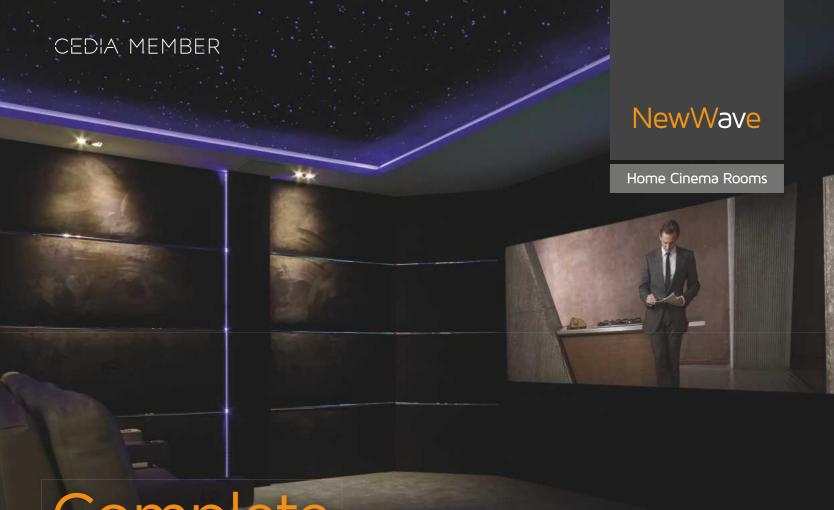
Compact at 35cm wide and given a funky blue face plate, this affordable 4K DLP PJ is very much designed for use in everyday living rooms. A 3,000 Lumens brightness rating, suggests BenQ, makes it ideal for sports viewing in well-lit environments – and there's even a Football Mode viewing preset.

The projector's 1.2x optical zoom leads to a fairly short 1.47-1.76:1 throw ratio, with a 100in

image possible from a distance of 3.25m. Automatic keystone correction is supplied to align bigscreen images, in place of vertical lens-shift functionality.

Connections include a 12V trigger, twin HDMIs (one compatible with 4K HDR sources) and audio in/outs tied to the unit's CinemaMaster Audio+ 2 in-built speaker system. www.beng.co.uk





# Complete Home Cinema Solutions



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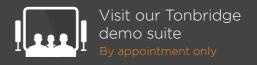
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### Extras....

Small items that could make a big impression...

### Alien Queen Wall Sculpture



Give your Aliens-style with this life-size wall

sculpture of the Alien Queen from Hollywood Collectibles Group. Priced around \$1,600(!), the hand-painted 'museum quality' sculpture is constructed from fibreglass and mixed media. An alternate version with an interchangeable extended inner jaw is also available.

### Stormtrooper Wireframe Light



Stormmay be associated with the

doesn't stop them from lighting etched acrylic light is based on the original movie helmets created in 1976 by prop master Andrew Ainsworth (whose signature is printed on the base). Grab one from TheFowndry.com for £25.

### Jurassic Park Gates



Park. US tov and collectible

Factory Entertainment will be releasing a detailed polystone reproduction of the film's iconic gates and park vehicle. The limited edition sculpture stands 11in tall and features battery-powered illuminated flickering torches. While it won't be available until later this year, you can pre-order one now for \$250.

## A super day out for fans

New O2 exhibition explores DC's iconic heroes on both page and screen

From the gleaming cityscapes of Metropolis to the beaches of Themyscira, via an overnight stay in crime-ridden Gotham, the new DC Exhibition: Dawn of Super Heroes offers a whistle-stop tour of the DC universe. Mingling film props and costumes with comic art, the show has begun a six-month residency at The O2, London, HCC donned a cape and cowl and took a closer look...

A co-production between DC Entertainment and Art Ludique-Le Musée, the exhibition is rich in heroic detail. With 45 original costumes and props, 300 or so concept sketches and more than 200 pages of original comic art, there's no shortage of spandex to revel in.

After the gauntlet of merch, visitors are ushered through a predictable chronological warren. Our advice is walk slowly, else you might miss some gems. A running loop of vintage Max Fleischer Superman animation reveals influences on Hayao Miyazaki, while superhero fashionistas will want to savour Christopher Reeve's cape and Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman bathers.

#### **Bat's entertainment**

The Batcave offers perhaps the widest variety of exhibits. Fans can inspect costumes worn in the Tim Burton Batman movies (for what it's worth, Penguin's suit appears to have aged rather better than Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman outfit) and gawp at the artistry of Anton Furst's original concept

art for 1989's Batman. And if you've ever wondered just how awesome the full-size Batpod from The Dark Knight Rises is close up, then this is the place to find out.

There's a lot of context on offer. Video clips document the DCU throughout, and there's specific narration via little audio paddles. There's so much to digest, in fact. that HCC went through twice. Reading and watching first time around, and then listening to the narration second time.

Much will be familiar to comic die-hards, but there are also items we've never seen before. such as early concept sketches for Tim Burton's aborted Superman Lives, the movie set to star Nicholas Cage as a tousled-hair version of the Last Son of Krypton.

The DC Exhibition also acknowledges the impact the publisher's iconic characters had on Sixties pop culture, with references to Andy Warhol,

Roy Lichtenstein and, of course, the classic 1960s Batman TV series.

### The real treasure

Curator Jean-Jacques Launier was given full access to the Warner Bros archive for the exhibition. 'Many of these props and artefacts are priceless. Some of the sketches, like the first ever Joker sketch, would be worth millions,' he says.

He's not wrong. The real treasure here is the art. Around every corner is an iconic cover in its raw pencil and ink form, sourced from private collections and dealers, or a comic page depicting hand-drawn visceral action

The fine-art style of Neal Adams, be it in his Superman vs. Muhammad Ali pencils or legendary Green Lantern/Green Arrow covers, is a joy to behold. The photorealistic painting style of Alex Ross is similarly beautiful, and the opportunity to see the clean, classic original lines of Curt Swan's Superman, juxtaposed against the raw, scratchy style of a young Frank Miller's Dark Knight, will be worth the price of admission alone for many. Make the effort to seek out Jack Kirby too. Comic art doesn't get much better than his original cover for Forever People #1.

Inevitably, the exhibition is heavily skewed to the trinity of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. But there's a nod to members of the Justice League and Suicide Squad, particularly Harley Quinn.

Whether your interest is in DC's movie franchises,

or comic book legends Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Bob Kane and Bill Finger, this exhibition is a pilgrimage worth taking. Catch it before it's up, up and away.

DC Exhibition: Dawn of Super Heroes runs at the O2 in London until September 9. Visit www.dcexhibition. co.uk for information and tickets.

The exhibition covers DC's heroic history from the 1930s to the present day



### This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...

Sony slashes VR costs

Sony Interactive Entertainment is dropping the price of entry to the world of consolepowered Virtual Reality. As part of a global price reduction, the



company has slashed the cost of its PlayStation VR Starter Pack (consisting of a VR headset, the PlayStation Camera and a download code for PlayStation VR Worlds) from £350 to £260 in the UK.

Making sweet music together
Bowers & Wilkins has been named the 'official headphone and speaker partner' of the iconic Abbey Road Studios. As part of this partnership, various B&W loudspeakers (including the flagship 800 D3 floorstander) will be installed throughout the studios.

Bar early seasons of

More slashed prices as Bluesound rewrites the ticket on its Pulse Soundbar. Perhaps with one eye on the Playbar from multiroom rival Sonos, the Pulse Soundbar's price tag has dropped from £1,000 to £800 in its standard black finish – and lowered to £900 for the white iteration.

LG embraces DTS Virtual:X
LG will release the world's first TVs
with integrated DTS Virtual:X technology
this year, beginning in its South Korea
homeland before rolling out to other territories.
As yet unspecified models from its 2018
Ultra HD TV lineup will pack the post-processing
talents to deliver – it's claimed – believable
height and surround effects from a conventional
speaker array.

Twentieth Century Fox appears to be having difficulties with its X-Men movie franchise. While Deadpool 2 is still on track to hit cinemas as planned (see p23), the studio's other X-Men films that were due for release this year have both been delayed to accommodate reshoots. Fellow spin-off New Mutants (originally due this month) has been bumped back to August 2019, while X-Men: Dark Phoenix has been shuffled back from November to next February.

Netflix beats BBC
The BBC is losing out to Netflix when it comes to appealing to younger viewers. New research conducted by the broadcaster reveals that people aged between 16 and 24 now spend more time per week watching Netflix than all BBC TV (including iPlayer). It also shows that people aged between 16 and 35 spent more time listening to streaming music services during the final quarter of 2017 than all BBC radio.

Sing while you're streaming
ROXI is a new music streaming service that
promises to turn your TV into the 'ultimate
music entertainment hub'. The brainchild of
Electric Jukebox, ROXI differs from more traditional
streaming services by also providing a karaoke mode
(a Wii-style microphone controller is provided) and
an interactive music trivia quiz. Altogether now...

Playing the game in 4K
It looks like Game of Thrones will make the jump to Ultra HD Blu-ray this Summer. While there's no official announcement from HBO, Amazon France is taking pre-orders for the show's first season on UHD Blu-ray, and lists a June 4 release date. Given that HBO previously re-released the

early seasons of the show on Blu-ray with Dolby Atmos audio, this seems like the next logical step.

Icon moves on
Troubled independent UK distributor Icon
Film Distribution has finally found a buyer in
the form of home entertainment specialist
Kaleidoscope. The purchase includes Icon's library
of more than 300 films including Apocalypto, Drive,
Paranormal Activity and The Babadook.

Stand Alone... together
Manga Entertainment is bringing the
acclaimed anime series Ghost in the
Shell: Stand Alone Complex to Blu-ray
in June. Priced around £100 and limited to just 1,000
copies, the Zavvi-exclusive 11-disc boxset collects
together all 52 episodes of the series, the Laughing
Man and Individual Eleven OVAs and the Solid State
Society film, plus an exclusive 140-page book.



### Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Back in ...Black



Thor: Ragnarok co-stars Chris
Hemsworth and Tessa Thompson
might be teaming up once again
for yet another comic book movie.
The duo are in talks to play two of
the leads in Sony's upcoming Men
in Black reboot, which will be set in
the same world as the previous
films, but involves an all-new bunch
of characters. Fast & Furious 8
helmer F. Gary Gray has been
tapped to direct.

### Grudge re-match

Men in Black isn't the only film series undergoing a reboot at Sony. Horror franchise *The Grudge* is also being 'reimagined', with Andrea Riseborough, John Cho, Demian Bichir and genre stalwart Lin Shaye attached to star in the new film.

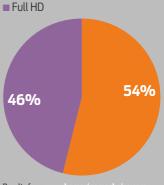
### Spielberg on Indy 5

Steven Spielberg has confirmed that the fifth Indiana Jones film will begin shooting in the UK next April. There's no word on what Indy will be up against this time – we just hope it's not aliens again...

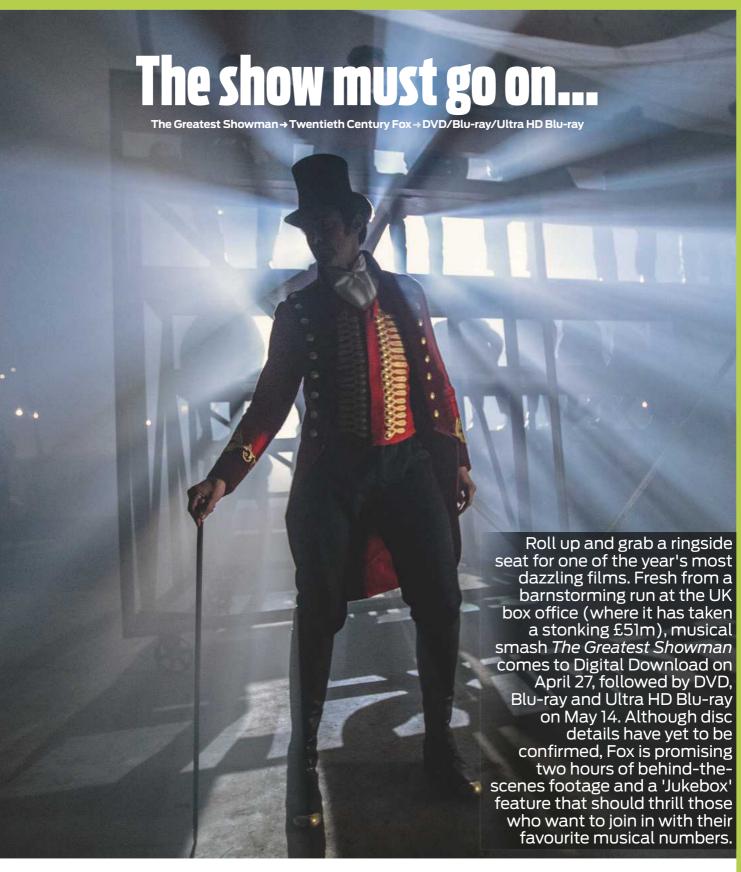
### We asked...

What is the resolution of your main home cinema display/screen?

■ 4K Ultra HD ■ Full HD



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com Go online for more polling action











# Stars of the Silver screen NEW Silver Series

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### Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the *HCC* Facebook page

### Thor: Ragnarok's Blu-ray soundmix...



The sound is so lacklustre! Stewart Heed

I've a feeling it might be to do with the film's original soundmix. I saw it whilst on holiday in Florida, at a Cinemark XD screen, by all accounts a fantastic cinema. I wasn't too impressed with the Dolby Atmos sound – it basically adhered to all the criticisms in your review. Lack of power, lack of actual surround sound... not what I'd expect from a big Marvel movie on a premium screen! Mark Hornsby

### What you're watching on your home cinema...



Good Easter films for me! Strangled and Psycho II! Robert Corrigan

The Spider-Man Trilogy in 4K, Justice league in 4K and GoldenEye on DTS Laserdisc.

Mike Wadkins

The third and fourth Indiana Jones films – impressive sound and picture from normal BD – plus The Mummy 3D, which was entertaining action-adventure with a monster or two.

Nothing – I'm going to see the new Tomb Raider in Dolby Atmos. Lee Regan

Pitch Perfect 3 and Jumanji in 4K. Steve Smith

The original *Jumanji*, on 4K disc f or Atmos, and *Muse: Live in Rome* are on my hit-list this weekend.

Fast things going round in circles... Yes, it's an F1 weekend for me in 4K. Stefano Pascuzzi

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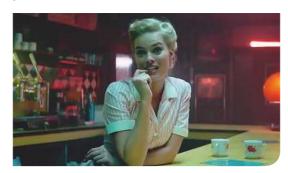
### Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



### The beasts are back

Warner is already hyping its Fantastic Beasts... sequel (The Crimes of Grindelwald) in advance of its November cinema release, and judged from this teaser trailer the studio has given director David Yates a massive SFX warchest. Look out for Jude Law taking on the role of a young Dumbledore. youtu.be/\_bUbEu3SlmE



### The end of the line

Margot Robbie (pictured) stars in *Terminal*, an independent crime drama due for release in May, also starring Dexter Fletcher, Simon Pegg and Mike Myers. If that description doesn't float your boat, check out this trailer, which suggests it may have a unique, neon-infused, noirish vibe.

youtu.be/AW-NivlFgrQ



#### Saddle up again

Westworld's first season was one of the best TV dramas of recent years, so this follow-on (beginning on Sky Atlantic right about now and hitting disc later this year), has been hotly anticipated. This teaser is exactly that — hinting at what's to come but keeping its cards close to its chest. Consider us hooked... youtu.be/sjVqDg32\_8s



### Cambridge takes audio to the Edge

This short behind-the-scenes video gives you a taste of the craft and time that Cambridge Audio has put into its new Edge series, premium slabs of hi-fi released to celebrate the company's 50th anniversary. But could we please have a multichannel version?

youtu.be/3eHCh-O5n6E



### Sound advice

The first episode in a new series of podcasts from Dolby, this runs for over an hour and features Skywalker Sound stalwart Randy Thom going into detail about movie audio design, the birth of surround sound, his own career and plenty more. Highly recommended.

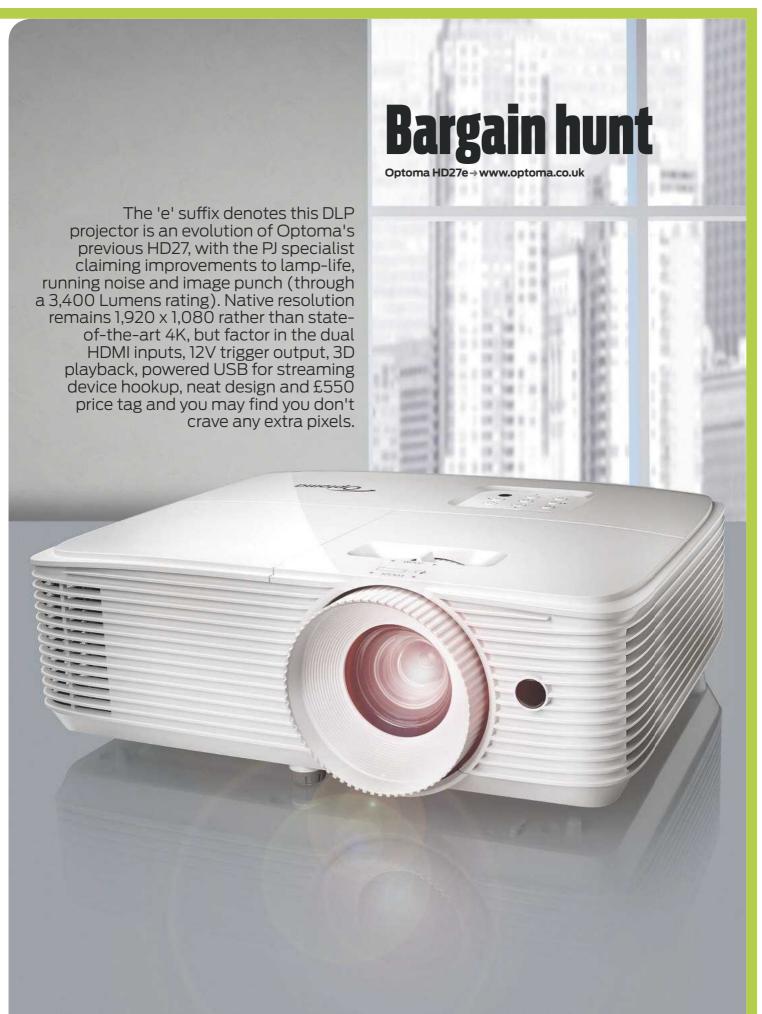
youtu.be/lZn\_lsyhxvk



#### **Puppet masters**

The *Critters* franchise — a kind of sci-fi-tinged, gore-laden version of *Gremlins* — was notable for its brilliant practical effects, none more so than its puppet cast of killer aliens. This (very fuzzy) behind-the-scenes vid gives you a flavour of how the FX team brought them all to life.

facebook.com/Fangoria/videos/1630317240348104





The AF8 OLED (above) features the same panel and processing as last year's A1

**THERE'S MORE TO** Sony's 4K TVs than meets the eye. The Japanese major says it's exploiting years of expertise in the broadcast field and cinema production to ensure its 2018 TV range is a class apart.

Certainly, looking at the brand's incoming flatscreen lineup, with its premium designs and head-turning image quality, it's difficult to believe there was once speculation that Sony would shut down its loss-making TV business. But that was then, this is now. With a new high-end OLED hero, plus a formidable fleet of LED 4K flatscreens, Sony is (literally) a brand to watch. HCC was invited to Sony Europe's HQ to peer behind the new panels.

Sony's XF80 series: entry-level 4K sets with an attractive design



### Its. An(other). OLED

The company's 2018 headliner is the AF8. First spotted at CES, this second-generation 4K OLED offering takes a more conventional approach to design than its A1 predecessor (it no longer leans back, for a start), although the set also retains that model's Acoustic Surface audio technology, wherein the panel itself produces forward-facing sound using vibration rather than conventional stereo drivers. However, out goes the powerful subwoofer (mounted in the TV's stand) and in come new, downsized bass drivers.

Also retained on the AF8, across both its 55in and 65in versions, is the A1's panel and X1 Extreme image processor. This is perhaps an unusual move in a world of rapid change, but no bad thing. Fine detail, colour depth and near-black performance still appear exemplary.

And, says Gavin McCarron, technical marketing manager at Sony Europe, it's not through happenstance. 'We carry out factory calibration of luminance and colour to mimic the characteristics of our Trimaster mastering monitor. This level of calibration can't be achieved once a panel has left the factory. It needs to be done factory-side.' Such fine-tuning is done to both OLED and LED LCD screens, we're told.

McCarron concedes that the pre-calibration of a studio-grade Trimaster is a little bit more time-consuming than a consumer panel, but points out that there's direct correlation between Sony's flagship Ultra HD TVs and a reference Trimaster EL monitor, as used in studio colour grading suites around the world.

'We really try to mirror a director's intent in our picture processing,' he says. 'I know there are a lot of calibration services, but some things can't be achieved on a finished set. We picked up a lot of expertise in our CRT days.'

While the AF8 is born of an 'ain't broke, don't fix it' ethos, bigger changes can be found on Sony's LED sets, including wider deployment of the high-end X1 Extreme processor. One beneficiary is the XF90 (reviewed this issue, p40), which replaces last year's XE90. This comes in the same screen size options (49in, 55in, 65in and 75in), but benefits from an improved full array LED backlight for greater contrast, as well as better processing by moving away from the (non-Extreme) X1 chipset.

Sony's silicon doesn't just analyse any incoming signal. It also analyses the characteristics of the panel it's driving. When the processor understands the capabilities of the TV's colour, brightness and detail, it can apply more precise and accurate dynamic tone mapping, says the brand.

### Living on the edge

Edge LED illumination is still employed on the XF85, which will no doubt be Sony's mass-market hero. Fashionistas should note that it's available in both black and silver finishes on its four smaller screen sizes (43in, 49in, 55in and 65in), while two larger models (75in and 85in) come in black only.

Mid-range it may be, but the specification is still high. Like the XF90, this uses a 100Hz panel, with image processing handled by the brand's workhorse X1 processor. This means it's not in line for a Dolby Vision upgrade, but does support HDR10 and HLG.

The real win here, though, remains the brand's object-based HDR remastering. Used to give a *faux* HDR look (exploiting the natural ability of the panel and backlight) to all SDR content, the technique works well. We'll be waiting for a sample to see just how effective its HDR handling is, but an early hands-on has us salivating.

Another range likely to attract attention is the edge-lit XF80 Series, which represents a new entry level for Sony UHD. Available at sizes up to 55in, this combines stylish looks (the narrow aluminium frame and central pedestal stands are attractive) with a better-than-budget spec. But there is a



Sony demo'd its new TV hardware at its UK-based European HO

caveat – the key difference between the XF80 and its XF85 stablemate is the use of a lower-cost 50Hz panel, which impacts motion handling, an ongoing challenge for LCD screens. Meanwhile, the XF90 range is endowed with Sony's new X-Motion Clarity, which uses a proprietary algorithm to boost LED brightness selectively within an image, reducing flicker caused by black frame insertion. The result is less motion blur without unwanted side effects. (See p28 for more about motion smoothing technology).

All Sony's X-branded TVs are based on the Android platform. It's fair to say that Android isn't the best loved of such systems, but it is getting smarter. For a start, Chromecast is built-in, which enables a growing number of apps to cast directly to the TV. It also now offers hands-free control via Amazon Alexa and Google Assistant (they were demo'd at Sony's HQ with the company's LF-S50G Google Assistant speaker for control and search). And there's even the promise of a more intuitive and less cluttered user interface down the road when Android Oreo is released.

Once again, Sony is stocking its TVs with YouView functionality, enabling full catchup from the UK's big four broadcasters, and backwards EPG interaction.





### **HDR** all over

Of course, Sony isn't just about 4K. It continues to offer HDR support on some of its Full HD models too, (whereas some brands still sell 4K screens with no HDR compatibility). However, it says much that the company isn't launching any new 32in screens this year, just continuing with existing sets. Both the ongoing R series (non-smart) and the WE6 (smart) are HDR-capable and are seen by Sony as screen partners for the HDR-capable base PlayStation 4 model.

What is new for 2018 is the RF4, which is an HDR compatible HD TV, albeit non-smart, and the step-up WF6, a Freeview Play set in 43in and 50in screen sizes. While it doesn't use the Android OS, it does offer a healthy selection of catch-up TV services (BBC iPlayer, ITVHub, All4 and Demand 5) plus Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and YouTube. It even has a basic web browser. As a secondary screen, it has a lot going for it − as long as you won't miss those extra pixels ■



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### Solo: A Star Wars Story

In cinemas: May 25

Spin-off movies from the main *Star Wars* saga didn't sound like the greatest idea ever (we all have memories of *The Scorpion King*), but 2016's *Rogue One* proved that the franchise is big enough to veer away from its main arc and still deliver what its fans want. Next on the spin-off agenda is this Han Solo origin story, which casts Alden Ehrenreich as the young Millennium Falcon flyer, abetted by his Wookiee companion Chewbacca.

A decision by studio head Kathleen Kennedy to replace directing duo Phil Lord and Chris Miller with veteran Ron Howard midway through Solo...'s production has set the Hollywood rumour machine into overdrive. At the same time, the initial trailer led to some (predictable) gnashing of teeth from Star Wars stalwarts about Ehrenreich's suitability to fill the boots of original Han Solo actor Harrison Ford. None of this means the movie itself won't be a hit, however.

When it comes to *Solo*'s home media release, the film's 3.4K and 6.5K digital photography (and 4K digital intermediate) will hopefully filter through to a superior Ultra HD Blu-ray release (and separate 3D outing), and should follow the format set by ...*The Last Jedi* (see p94) in featuring Dolby Atmos audio and Dolby Vision HDR.

Just don't look out for a warts-and-all *Making of...* documentary.







### **Deadpool 2**

In cinemas: May 15

Marvel's mutant 'Merc with the Mouth' returns to cinemas with another foul-mouthed, ultra-violent, fourth-wall-breaking adventure in the latest addition to Fox's *X-Men* franchise. This time around Deadpool puts together his own team (which he dubs X-Force) to save a young boy from a time-travelling soldier.

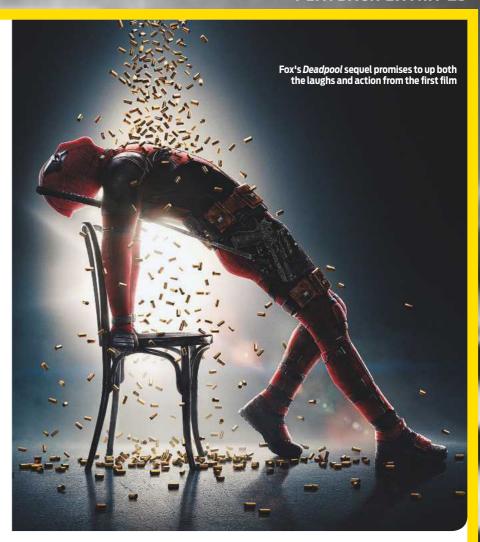
Released back in 2016, the original — and strictly adults-only — *Deadpool* was an unexpected smash hit for Fox. It's appeal didn't end on the bigscreen either, with the film going on to become one of the biggest sellers of the fledgling 4K disc format.

But for all of its success, there's no getting away from the fact that the original film's action scenes (whisper it) felt a little cheap by the standards of most superhero flicks. Thankfully, it seems *Deadpool 2* won't be content to coast by on its outrageous humour, and will be marrying it to some spectacular

action. The film has a whole new team of mutants on tap (who already have their own spin-off outing in the works), and Fox has drafted in David Leitch to direct, who previously helmed *Atomic Blonde* and is one half of the team

promise is therefore of a sequel that's a little more polished – and another bestselling 4K Blu-ray.

behind John Wick The



### Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom

In cinemas: June 6

Jurassic World, the long-awaited fourth instalment of the dinosaur franchise, was huge. Brachiosaurus huge. The movie, which teamed up Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard as park employees struggling to contain a new hybrid dino, stomped its way to a massive \$1.6bn global box office taking. A sequel was never in doubt.

The first Jurassic World worked so well because it finally delivered on the wishes of park owner John Hammond (Richard Attenborough), and allowed audiences to tour around a full-size, fully operational Jurassic Park. This follow-up film won't have that same wow factor, so will have to explore other ideas to keep us hooked. One of which appears to be bringing Jeff Goldblum back for a cameo role. Pratt and Howard are also returning.

Before trooping off to catch *Fallen Kingdom* at the multiplex (in either 2D or 3D), Universal is whetting our appetites by releasing the previous four films in the franchise on UHD Blu-ray in May — as a 'Trilogy Collection' plus *Jurassic World* as a standalone release, or in separate steelbooks as a Zavviexclusive. At the time of writing there was still no official word on disc specifications, but it may be that we see soundmixes upgraded to DTS:X. Time to get your subwoofer primed...





Chris Pratt is back in Fallen Kingdom, as are CG beasts and gyrospheres

Debbie Ocean (Sandra Bullock) is the catalyst for another high-concept heist in Ocean's 8



### Ocean's 8

In cinemas: June 22

If the female take on action franchise *The Expendables* – dubbed *The Expendabelles*, naturally – ever gets off the ground, its gender-reverse thunder will have been stolen by this spin-off movie to Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's* franchise. Out go George Clooney and his posse of sharp-suited tricksters (bar Matt Damon, who returns here in a minor role), and in come Sandra Bullock, Anne Hathaway, Rhianna, Cate Blanchett, Helena Bonham Carter, Dakota Fanning and more to make up a new gang of con artists. Soderbergh relinquishes director duties to Gary Ross (*The Hunger Games*, *Seabiscuit*).

With memories of the original trilogy fading fast (*Ocean's 13* was released back in 2007), a revisit now to the world of glamour and grifting makes sense, and *Ocean's 8* may well prove the perfect antidote to 2018's roster of SFX spectaculars. And, as no actual characters are being recast as female, it will hopefully avoid the tedious, angry criticism levelled at 2016's *Ghostbusters*. Although we can't be certain.

Warner Bros is handling distribution, which we expect will lead to a UK 4K Blu-ray before the end of the year. What would be even better is for Soderbergh's *Ocean's...* trilogy to also get a reissue, as the existing 1080p BDs are far from the best the format has to offer.

### **Further ahead**

More big movies on the radar 'til Christmas 2018

Venom



Long in gestation, this *Spider-Man* spin-off (confusingly unrelated to the Marvel Cinematic Universe) finally arrives in cinemas in October. Tom Hardy will be growling his way through dialogue as the titular anti-hero.

### **The Predator**

'There's no killing what can't be killed,' said King Willie in *Predator 2*, a tenet that perhaps explains Fox's continued efforts to get its killer alien franchise back in theatres. At least this time it has an A-list director (Shane Black) and original producing team Joel Silver and Lawrence Gordon onboard. Hunt it down in cinemas in September.

### Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald



Warner Bros returns to the world of Harry Potter in November for another prequel written directly by J.K Rowling. The first *Fantastic Beasts* was an unbridled joy (and made for a great 4K platter) so fingers crossed the promise of a bigger role for Johnny Depp doesn't rip the magic out of this one.

#### Creed 2

Creed, the boxing flick that saw Sylvester Stallone's Rocky take on the role of trainer to upstart pugilist Adonis Creed, was a surprise critical and commercial hit. We're all in favour of another bout, especially as Dolph Lundgren is reprising his role as Ivan Drago.



# Sicario: Day of the Soldado

#### In cinemas: June 29

Sicario director Dennis Villeneuve has moved on to bigger things (Blade Runner 2049, for one), but this perhaps unexpected sequel to the 2015 thriller keeps Josh Brolin and Benicio del Toro in their roles as CIA man Matt Graver and his black ops specialist Alejandro. It's hard to imagine either of them signing up for a quickly produced cash-in, so the clumsy title that evokes awkward memories of straight-to-video action sequels is probably a red herring.

The director's chair is now filled by Stefano Sollima, who previously helmed the brilliant Italian organised crime series *Gomorrah*. *Sicario* writer Taylor Sheridan is again on scripting duties, and – judging by the trailers – the extraordinary original score has also been retained.

While Sony Pictures is handling North American distribution, Lionsgate will bring the flick to the UK. Which may mean an Atmos mix across all home media releases, and not just Ultra HD Blu-ray.



### **Incredibles 2**

### In cinemas: July 13

Given the huge explosion in popularity the superhero movie has undergone since the release of Pixar's animated smash *The Incredibles* in 2004, nobody is questioning the studio for returning to the well for a belated sequel. And the good news is that this is no by-the-numbers follow-up. Instead, original writer-director Brad Bird returns to continue the story he began 14 years ago, exploring gender roles as Mr. Incredible (Craig T. Nelson) adjusts to life as a stay-at-home dad, while his wife Elastigirl (Holly Hunter) gets on with fighting crime.

With the two Pixar films released on Ultra HD Blu-ray to date (*Cars 3* and *Coco*) delivering some of the most eye-wateringly beautiful 4K HDR visuals to ever grace a home cinema, we're primed for *Incredibles 2* to follow suit. Meanwhile, memories of the DTS-HD MA track that graced *The Incredibles'* Blu-ray has us salivating at what this sequel's Dolby Atmos mix may unleash.

Speaking of *The Incredibles*, rumours abound of a 4K release of that film to support the sequel.



### Skyscraper

#### In cinemas: July 13

Since *Die Hard*, action fans have witnessed countless titles riffing on its premise ('It's like *Die Hard*, but on a boat!'). With its one-man-fighting-baddies-in-a-tall-building plot, *Skyscraper* has gone full-circle. Presumably the pitch was simply, 'It's *Die Hard* again.'

Originality isn't everything, though, and in cast leader Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson, *Skyscraper* has found perhaps the only actor around who can convince as both an ordinary working man (in this case, a security guard) and an all-guns-blazing hero.

Neve Campbell, last seen running away from a rubber-masked murderer in *Scream 4*, plays his wife.

Trailers have teased a popcorn movie with some wonderfully over-the-top stuntwork, while director Rawson Marshall Thurber has opted to shoot digitally on both Arri Alexa XT and Alexa 65 cameras – the latter enabling capture at up to 6.5K.

Converted in post-production to 3D, there's likely to be a stereoscopic 3D disc release down the line. When it comes to sonics, studio Universal typically offers a 3D audio mix (either Atmos or DTS:X) across all HD releases. A Dolby Vision 4K platter could follow this movie's Dolby Cinema release, too.



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## Mission: Impossible – Fallout

#### In cinemas: July 26

The sixth Mission: Impossible film marks several firsts for the series. It's the first to have a returning director (Christopher McQuarrie also oversaw previous instalment ...Rogue Nation). It's the first to be shot using IMAX 3D digital cameras. And it's also the first to have had production shut down for nine weeks after its leading man broke his ankle.

If the prospect of watching the precise moment Cruise cracks his foot in crystal-clear slo-mo isn't enough to tempt you (the shot in question has already appeared in the trailer), then there are other reasons to get excited about *Mission: Impossible – Fallout*, and its 4K Blu-ray outing towards the end of the year. Chief among these are the spectacular stunts and action sequences that have become the franchise's bread and butter.

Another reason is the news that Paramount is prepping the previous five films for debut on Ultra HD Blu-ray this year. Given that the Blu-ray releases of the first titles are in need of serious AV upgrades (they don't even sport lossless soundtracks), the idea of brand-new 4K masters with remixed Dolby Atmos (or even DTS-HD MA 5.1) audio is enough to have us humming the series theme tune in anticipation. Be wary of any six-film boxset, though — this is one franchise that may run and run.





In Mission: Impossible – Fallout, Tom Cruise is still doing his own crazy stunts

Jason Statham and Li Bingbing prepare for some aquatic action in *The Meg* 



### The Meg

### In cinemas: August 10

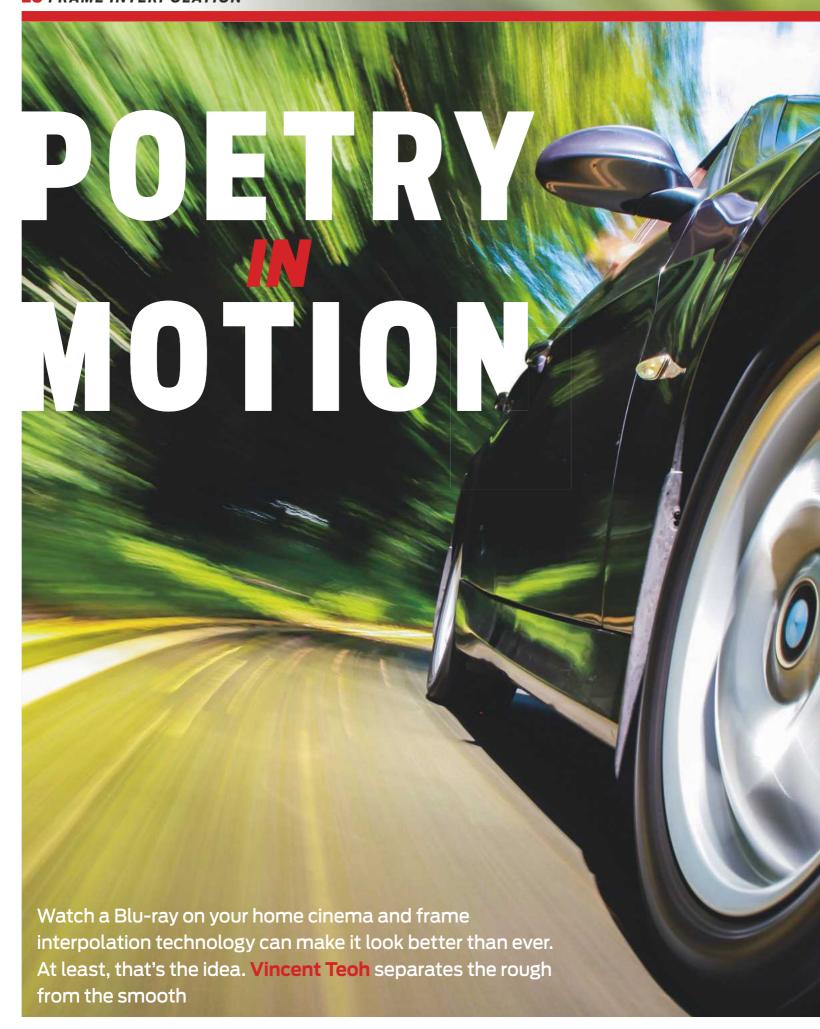
A certain breed of film fan will get as far as 'Jason Statham vs a giant shark' and pre-order their ticket for *The Meg*, but there's potentially more to this creature-feature than mere B-movie thrills.

Producer Lorenzo di Bonaventura has A-grade form with the likes of the *Transformers* series, *Deepwater Horizon*, *Salt* and *Only the Brave*, while the film's rumoured \$150m budget has us hoping the inevitable CG beastie FX may stand up to scrutiny.

And then there's leading man Jason Statham. While not renowned for his acting chops, he has undoubted screen presence, efficient stunt skills and – as an ex-diver who competed for the UK in the 1990 Commonwealth Games – he should breeze through the underwater scenes.

The film itself has finally emerged from 'development hell', with rights for its source novel (1997's Meg by Steve Alten) initially bought by Disney shortly after its publication. Twenty years later, thanks to a co-distribution deal between Warner Bros and Gravity Pictures, we will finally get the answer to the eternal question, 'Who wins in a battle between man and 70ft shark?'

Look out for a 4K Blu-ray release late Autumn, by which time a sequel may have been quickly greenlit if *The Meg* swims, rather than sinks, at the global box office  $\blacksquare$ 





WHILE CONTRAST, COLOURS and video processing are important considerations for those who value picture quality, motion performance is something that can make or break a television. After all, the vast majority of content we watch on TV is moving imagery.

Let's start with the movies we have all come to appreciate and love. Traditionally, the frame rate of such material has been 24fps (or frames per second), a standard that was adopted initially for financial and technical reasons – it was the slowest frame rate at which comprehensible sound could be produced from synchronisation of the optical track running along the film.

However, over the decades 24fps has become synonymous with the 'film' look: its dreamy and surreal aesthetics key to the suspension of disbelief that allows us to immerse in movies irrespective of how unrealistic the plot, dialogue and set design may be. Note that two films that have been released with higher frame rates (*The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* and *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk*) drew shocked responses from viewers complaining that they looked 'fake' — see box out, p30.

As 24 frames per second isn't the fastest of frame rates, 24fps material will not only contain some inherent blur, but also appear slightly shuttery (I try not to use the term 'judder' to describe the 24p strobe effect), especially if magnified on modern largescreen TVs. These characteristics may not appeal to some viewers, prompting TV manufacturers to design frame interpolation algorithms to provide a clearer and smoother viewing experience.

### The numbers game

Before we delve into frame interpolation, we need to talk about the panel refresh rate on televisions. Broadly speaking, there are 60Hz TVs and 120Hz TVs, with the latter being generally more expensive, particularly on higher resolutions – the more affordable 4K televisions (sub-£1,000 at launch) typically have a native refresh rate of 60Hz. In countries which use 50Hz power frequency (such as the UK), these TVs are marketed as 50Hz and 100Hz displays respectively, but for all intents and purposes they can do 60Hz and 120Hz too.

Compared with a 120Hz panel, a 60Hz one suffers from a couple of limitations that will impact on its motion presentation. The first is seen when dealing with 24fps content such as movies and most non-soap dramas these days. Because 60 is not fully divisible by 24, a telecine process known as 3:2 pulldown splits each frame into fields which are then displayed alternately in an uneven fashion: the first field repeated two times; the second field repeated three times; and so on and so forth. The outcome is a regular stutter that's particularly visible during slow panning shots, otherwise known as telecinic judder.

On the other hand, a 120Hz panel, as found on most high-end LED LCDs and OLEDs over the past couple of years, can present film footage at perfect multiples of 24Hz using a process called 5:5 pulldown, therefore eradicating such judder.

A 120Hz panel also allows for more options (for example frame interpolation and black frame insertion) to enhance the motion clarity and smoothness of 50Hz/60Hz content, since there are double the number of frames for such motion-boosting technologies to be deployed.

This brings us to motion-compensated frame interpolation (aka MCFI). This creates an artificial frame between the original frames to either reduce motion blur, smooth out judder, or both. But depending on the implemented MCFI algorithm, two notable side effects can ensue.

### Scrubbing up

The first is the infamous soap opera effect, which causes 24fps films to look like hyper-smooth, cheaply shot video, similar to those poor-quality Australian soaps you pretended to never watch in the 1980s (hence 'soap opera effect' or SOE). As mentioned earlier, the historical use of 24fps has established its qualities to be associated with high-quality cinematic production, and if you're a purist, subverting the very defining fabric of film through the introduction of soap opera affect will most likely lessen your enjoyment of the movie. Fortunately, more and more TV brands are now offering separate controls for interpolating low- and high-grade motion in their hardware user menus (more on this later), allowing viewers to improve motion sharpness without introducing SOE.

Perhaps less avoidable are interpolation artefacts following the injection of artificial frames. If you've bought a new TV and watch it out of the box without adjusting the factory settings, you may have seen haloing, shimmering, tearing or other forms of aberrations around objects moving across a complex backdrop, for example a ball breaking up as it flies past the crowd in football broadcasts, or a person walking in front of a brick wall or leafy hedge. These artefacts are caused by the incapability of the onboard processing system (which is almost certainly enabled by default on modern TVs out of the box) to interpolate frames with enough precision. There's only so much guesswork the silicon can do. In general, the more aggressive the frame interpolation – the more it aims for a smooth image – the more artefacts that can be introduced.

It's because of these shortcomings of frame interpolation that video enthusiasts are more excited by black frame insertion (or BFI) technology to boost motion resolution. As suggested by the name, this technique inserts a black frame between the original frames to emulate the low-persistence properties of impulse-type displays. You may be confused by now, so let me explain.

A TV can broadly be categorised as either a hold-type or impulse-type display depending on how the panel is driven. Hold-type displays like LCDs (including those using an LED backlight) and OLEDs display each frame continuously until it's replaced by the next frame. Research has shown that it is the persistence of the preceding static frame in our retina, as our eyes track the movement on screen, that contributes significantly to what

we perceive as motion blur - referred to as the sample-and-hold effect.

On impulse-type displays such as CRTs and plasmas (remember them?), the decay of the phosphors naturally introduces a fade-to-black interval which effectively 'refreshes' our retina and clears out any prolonged frame persistence, resulting in improved motion clarity. This is basically what black frame insertion is trying to

achieve, by mimicking impulse-

'LG is offering black frame driven motion on hold-type displays. insertion for the first time in the company's OLED history on its 2018 fleet'

Like all pharmaceutical products, black frame insertion is not without its own side effects. One is a drop in light output, but most mid/ high-end TVs in recent years should have enough brightness reserves

to compensate appropriately. In an industry first, Sony has this year also debuted a technology (X-Motion Clarity) on its XF90 series of full-array local dimming LED televisions, which utilises the TV's dimming algorithm to locally boost the brightness of picture segments where black frame insertion takes place.

More problematic is flicker caused by the artificial injection of black frames. This may be more apparent depending on the source frame rate (on the 2017 Panasonic and Sony OLEDs, 50Hz material looked more flickery than 60Hz content); black flash duty cycle; and your own sensitivity. But if you can tolerate (or even better, don't notice)

the flicker, then you can enjoy heightened motion clarity without having to put up with soap opera effect or interpolation artefacts. It is because of the clamour for black frame insertion among video enthusiasts that LG is offering the technology for the first time in the company's OLED history on its

On that note, let's explore the motion-enhancing technologies found on the four leading TV brands in the UK.

### True Intelligent Auto Motionflow!

LG calls its motion-smooth technology TruMotion, and before 2018, this was made up of purely motion-compensated frame interpolation without black frame insertion. Even the least aggressive TruMotion preset of Clear introduced noticeable soap opera effect and interpolation artefacts, prompting most cinephiles to switch the processing off for the best results.

The South Korean brand does offer separate De-Judder and De-Blur controls in the TruMotion 'User' sub-menu to target 24/25fps and 50/60fps content respectively. If you wish to smooth out judder in movies, nudge de-judder up gently; whereas if you want higher motion clarity, use the de-blur control. By experimenting, it's possible to arrive at a balanced set of values that increases motion sharpness without overtly significant soap opera effect, though look out for the odd stutter or glitch from time to time.

Hobbit in HFR at cinemas may one day get a taste

of it themselves.



way to see this film... 24 frames was arrived at in

a very arbitrary way, and it's become the way

audiences didn't experience it.

a more standard 24fps conversion, meaning most

Panasonic's MCFI technology is available through the Intelligent Frame Creation option in the user menu, and since 2016 the Japanese company has also started providing control over backlight scanning/black frame insertion via a Clear Motion setting. From my experience testing Intelligent Frame Creation on the Panasonic TVs I've calibrated, 'IFC Min' is a good catch-all setting that reduces motion blur and judder while incurring only the slightest blink-and-you'll-miss-it soap opera effect and interpolation artefacts.

For the more adventurous, Panasonic also offers independently adjustable Film Smooth and Blur Reduction settings in the Intelligent Frame Creation 'Custom' sub-menu on its latest TVs. Use the former to smooth out judder in movies, and the latter to improve motion clarity, especially in fast-moving sports broadcasts.

Next up, Samsung offers frame interpolation and black frame insertion on its higher-end televisions, both found under the Auto Motion Plus sub-menu. I've always found the default Auto Motion Plus presets to be overly aggressive, resulting in apparent soap opera effect and distracting artefacts, but thankfully the flatscreen giant also offers separate Blur Reduction and Judder Reduction controls in the Auto Motion Plus 'Custom' area, allowing users to achieve higher motion clarity without having to endure objectionable slickness. The company's black frame insertion control, namely LED Clear Motion, can be found here too, and among the major TV brands, Samsung's BFI algorithm tends to introduce the least flicker across 24Hz, 50Hz and 60Hz sources.

Sony is the only TV manufacturer out of the 'Big Four' to not offer independently adjustable de-blur and de-judder settings in its Motionflow sub-menu. What this means is that to achieve any meaningful increase in motion resolution on a Sony Bravia, some soap opera effect is inevitable however mild, although to be fair it's not as offensive as that of other brands. Sony's motion processing is widely considered to be the best in the industry: even with Motionflow off, slow panning shots in 24fps films generally look smoothest on Sony TVs, and should you choose to engage Motionflow, you'll see less interpolation artefacts than on rival sets.

Delve into Sony's Motionflow 'Custom' sub-menu, and you'll find Smoothness and Clearness sliders which determine the intensity of frame interpolation and backlight scanning respectively. Increasing the Clearness value will darken the image, and on certain Sony televisions, setting Clearness to 'Max' will activate pure black frame insertion (akin to the 'Impulse' mode on older Sony Bravias) which causes too much flicker and brightness drops for most use cases. The combination of Motionflow 'True Cinema' and the correct Film Mode setting allows users to recover 24p cadence from 60p sources for a smoother result without telecinic judder.

### A question of taste

There's a lot of tweaking experimentation to be done then, although at the end of the day, *HCC* is of the

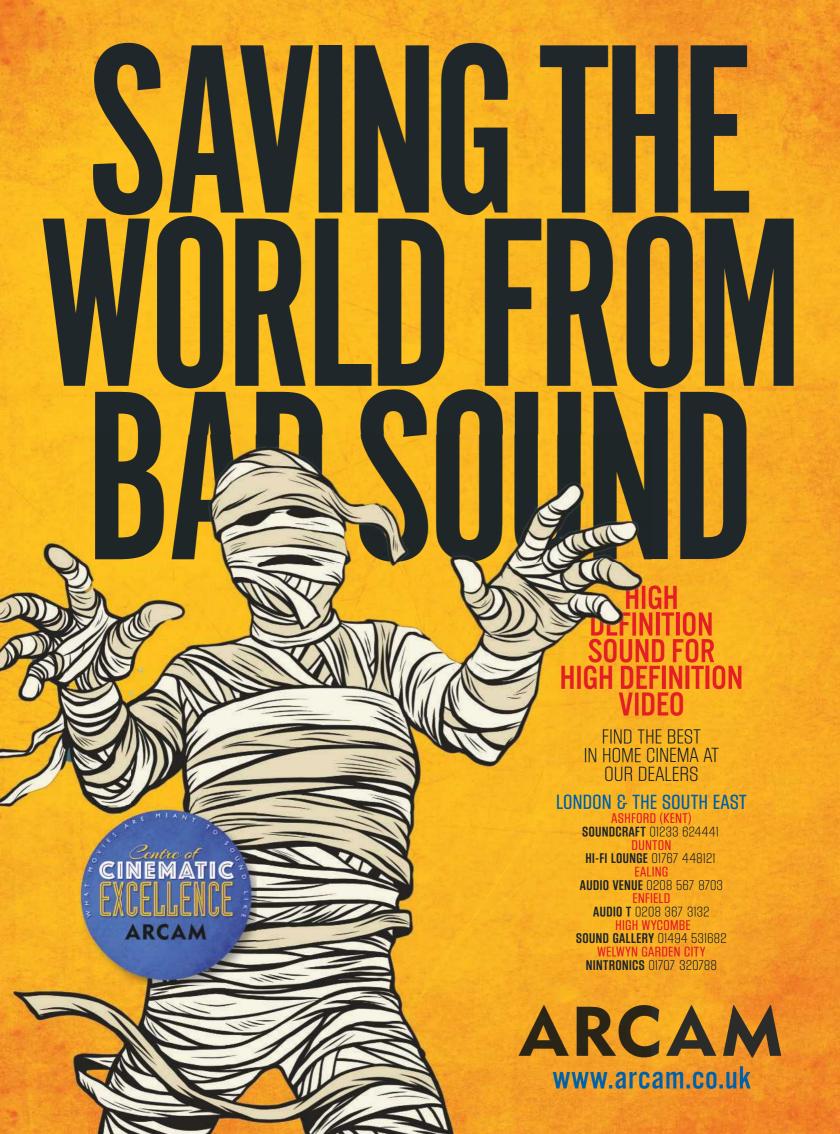


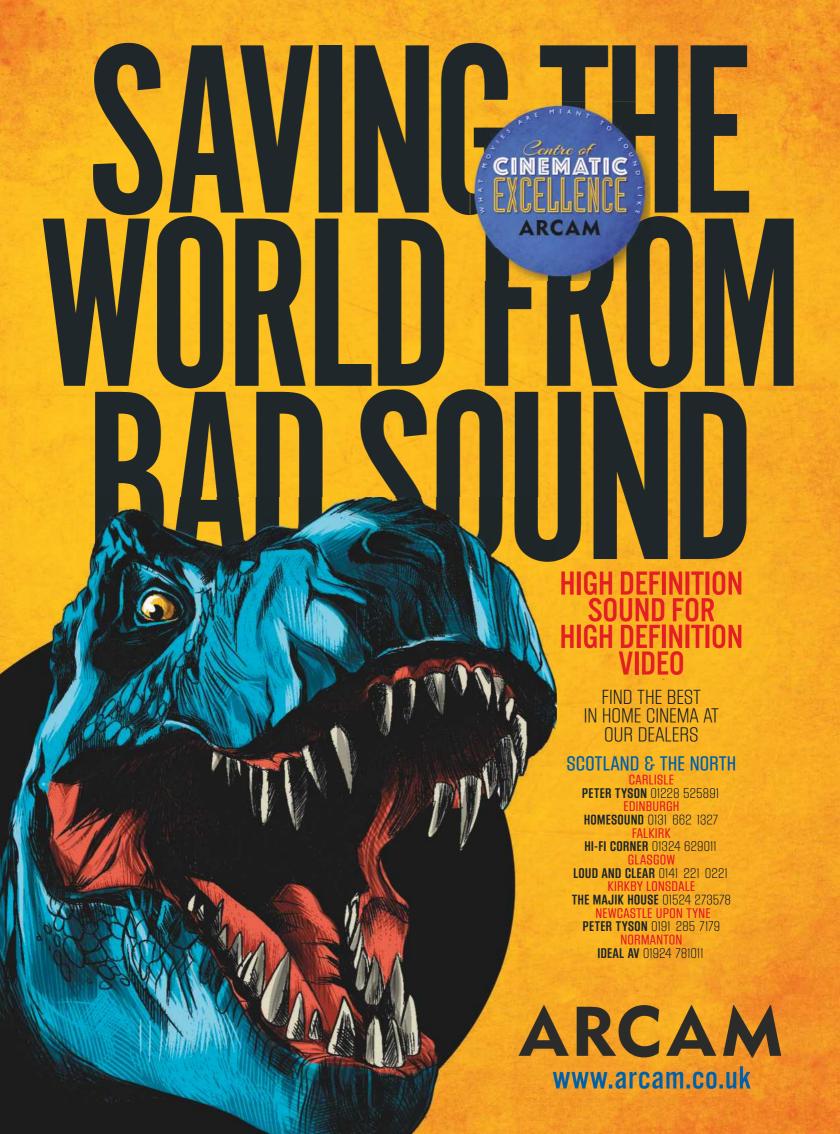


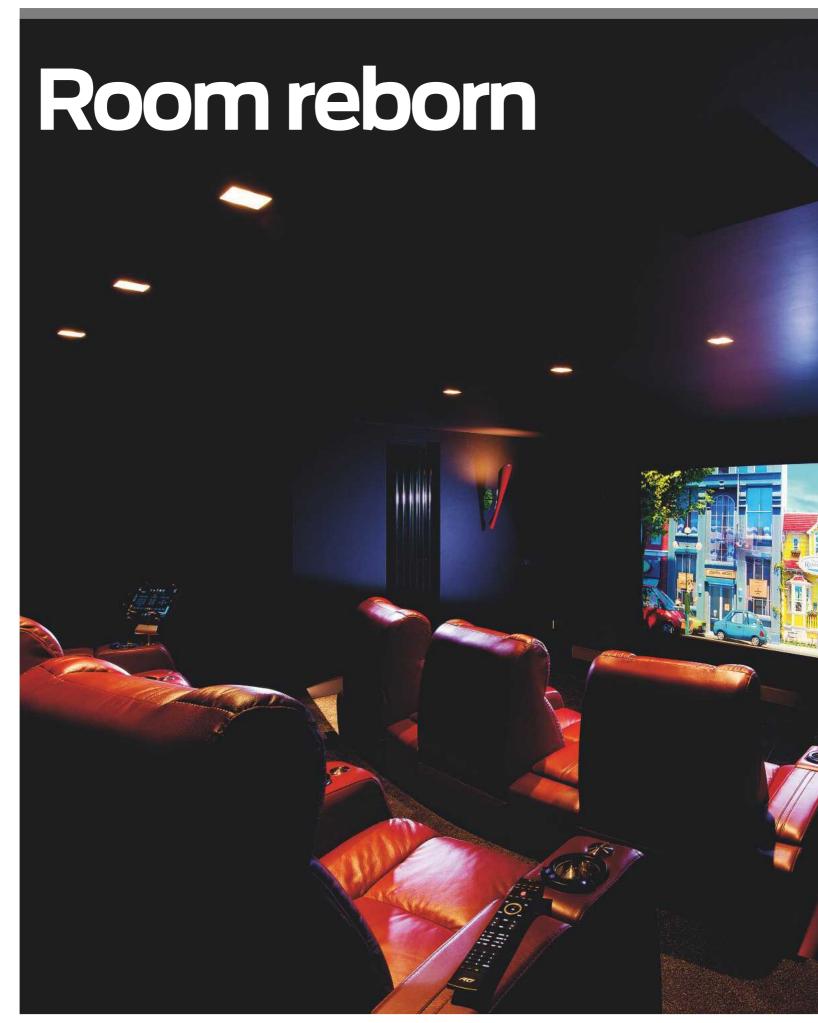
belief that when watching movies, you should only consider using frame interpolation if your TV (for example a 60Hz model) is not capable of reproducing 24fps without judder. Even then, we'd probably rather put up with occasional judder (which is normally only visible in slow panning shots) than with soap opera effect, as this permeates the entire movie and alters the underlying motion qualities that define film. Due to the low frame rate, 24fps material is inherently blurry (just pause any fast-action scene and you'll see the blur is present in the source) and slightly shuttery anyway, so frame interpolation (and black frame insertion, for that matter) won't provide any sizeable benefit.

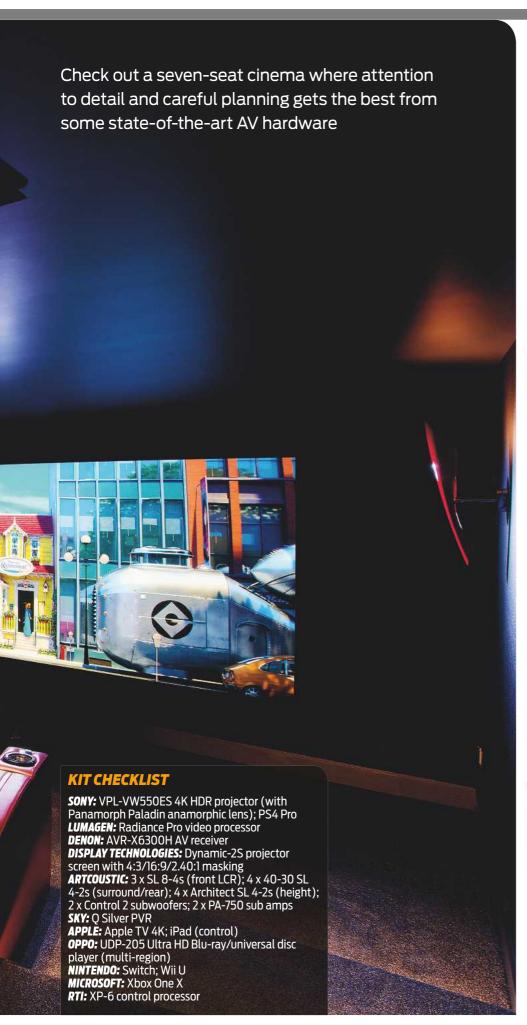
Video-based content such as fast-action sports, on the other hand, stands to benefit from judicious application of motion-compensated frame interpolation and/or black frame insertion, simply because the higher frame rate places more demand on the end display for a clearer, smoother picture. For watching sports, a good rule of thumb is to set your TV's MCFI control (if present) to its least aggressive setting (normally one notch above 'Off'). In most cases this should be sufficient to boost motion clarity without introducing significant artefacts. Happy experimenting! ■

Frame interpolation adds new 'artificial' frames between original frames (above) to reduce motion blur. However, interpolation artefacts caused by inefficient processing are possible, and the sort of thing to annoy AV purists!









FOR THIS PROJECT, Cheshire-based installer SONA was asked to take an existing (and underused) room and give the owner a setup worthy of the Sony 4K projector and 11-channel Denon receiver they'd already invested in, with two rows of seating, a motorised masking projection screen for constant height presentation, and a 'full-fat' 7.2.4 Dolby Atmos speaker system.

To ensure these aims could be reached (while accommodating some windows that had to be retained) 3D modelling and speaker placement calculations were conducted. The finished design not only includes a new front wall to house screen and LCR speaker/subwoofers, but redesigned walls that hide surround speakers and black-out blinds, giving the space a 'regular' feel when it's not being used for 4K movie action.



Once installed, the 'Scope ratio Display Technologies projector screen would nearly fill the viewing wall from floor to ceiling



Automated Lutron Sivoia blinds, hidden within new stud walls, were specified to enable the switch from daylight room to blacked-out cinema



A false front wall was constructed to allow behind-the-screen placement of the LCR speakers and twin subwoofers

An RTI controller and Apple iPad with a custom UI drive the system. Whether the room is used for a Sky Q binge-session or Xbox gaming fest, the projector, screen, blinds and lighting all kick into action at the touch of a button. Advanced image calibration comes via a Lumagen Radiance processor, which also works with a Panamorph anamorphic lens to deliver constant height, pixel-for-pixel aspect ratio switching. Smart lighting, a tidy kit rack and plush seating complete the premium package ■

### A. Hit the lights!

The room's multizone lighting is controlled via Lutron Grafik Eye QS hardware

### B. Box of tricks

A Lumagen Radiance Pro processor delivers advanced LUT calibration, and manages aspect ratios of 4K content before being output to the Sony projector

### C. Atmos on tap

The owner's Denon AVR-X6300H was called into duty to front the cinema's 7.2.4 Artcoustic speaker array

### D. Touch and go

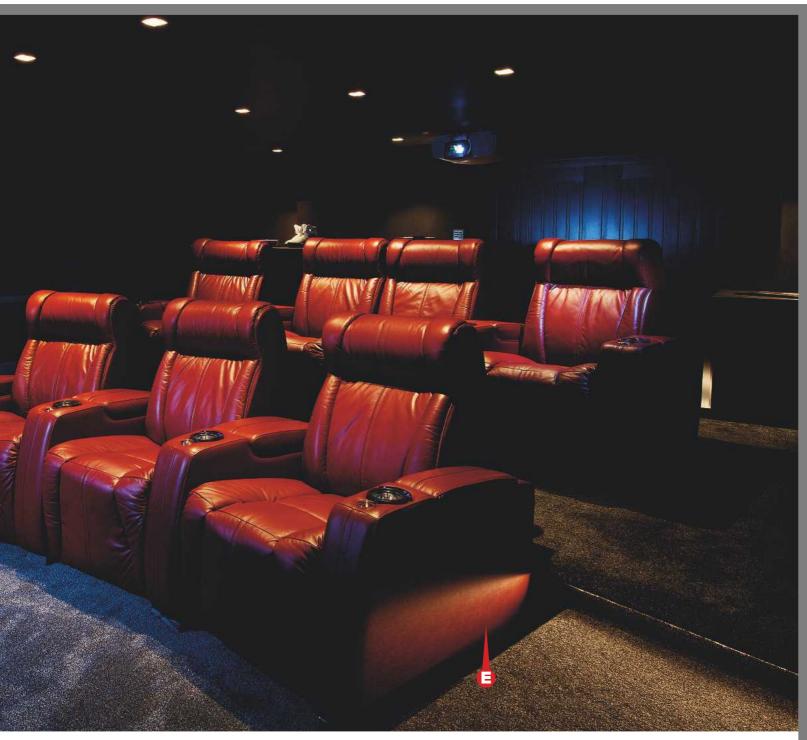
Choose a source via the iPad's UI, and the cinema's RTI controller does the rest, instigating automatic control over lighting, projector and blinds

#### E. Perfect vision

The twin-tier seating arrangement offers line-of-

















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# REVIEWS

→ HARDWARE SONY 55in XF9005 4K HDR TV with X1 Extreme processor BOWERS & WILKINS 5.1700 Series system SAMSUNG 65in 09 OLED TV NAD 7-channel AVR with Dirac Room EQ HITACHI Affordable 75in 4K TV VIVITEK Mid-price 4K DLP projector LG Dolby Vision-capable Ultra HD Blu-ray player CELLO Battery-powered 32in TV & MORE!



#### **AV INFO**

PRODUCT:
Direct-lit 4K HDR
LED TV with Android
smarts

POSITION: Below Sony's A8F OLED and ZD9 LED flagships

Parks: Panasonic 55FX750; LG 55SK9500 Sony's first 2018 screen barely puts a mid-range foot wrong, enthuses **Steve May** 

# Sony plays a peaky blinder

It's all about the backlight. You can have the smartest image processor in the showroom, but if your backlight isn't up to snuff then that shiny new LCD panel just isn't going to impress. This is one very good reason why AV enthusiasts adore full array LED systems — even the cleverest edge-lighting tends to betray itself sooner or later with light pooling and splotchy artefacts.

Unfortunately, direct-lit LED TVs aren't particularly common, not least because the majority of consumers equate thinness with quality, and those extra lamps add girth to a set. It matters not a jot on the high street that a direct LED-backlit TV will typically do a better job presenting HDR highlights and deeper blacks.

Thankfully, Sony continues to offer enthusiasts the option. Last year's XE9005 was a critical hit, which this year gives way to the XF9005. The good news is this update introduces a number of significant improvements over its predecessor.

For one thing, that critical backlight has been boosted for better contrast, and the set's image processor has been upgraded to X1 Extreme, which is trickling its way down the range to make way for the X1 Ultimate later in the year (probably). It also heralds a new motion handling technique called X-Motion Clarity.

#### Making a stand

I can't quite decide about the design of this 55in TV, to be honest. The 55XF9005 has an ultra-thin aluminium bezel and the branding is wonderfully subtle, but I'm not a huge fan of the non-wobble pedestal feet, which look oversized and inelegant. However, you may value the generally rock-solid footing.

Connections include four 4K-ready HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMIs, a trio of USBs (one a v3.0 for timeshifting onto an external USB hard drive), mini-jack AV input, digital optical audio output and Ethernet. The XF9005 also supports Bluetooth pairing with wireless headphones.

HDR support currently runs to HDR10 and HLG, with the promise of Dolby Vision via a firmware update. The sooner Sony can get its DV house in order in the UK, the better, as the number of discs is growing quickly.

There's no change on the connected front as Sony remains committed to the Android TV platform.

Consequently, this set is *sans* Freeview Play, using a YouView app to offer integrated catch-up and roll-back EPG. In use, the Android TV OS remains almost comically flaky: for example, throwing up messages that it can't display live TV (on top of a live TV broadcast), or complaining it isn't connected to the internet, before promptly changing its mind. Perhaps it's just developed a dry sense of humour?

Integrated streaming apps include Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, YouTube, Google Play, Rakuten TV, Mubi and others. Amazon and Netflix both stream in 4K and HDR, while both Netflix and Google Play get dedicated buttons on the remote control. The set also has VP9 decoding for YouTube 4K material, Chromecast built-in for direct streaming from Chromecast-enabled apps, and support for voice control from Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa.

#### **Black beauty**

The value of the TV's full array backlight is immediately noticeable. Screen tonality is smooth and black backdrops largely uniform. There are one none of the murky grey puddles witnessed on low-quality edge LED displays.

An X-tended Dynamic Range PRO adjustment allows the set to turn up and lower the backlight for accuracy (I opted to leave it on Medium), but there is a limit to the precision of its backlight dimming. The XF9005 doesn't have anywhere near the same number of LED clusters as found on Sony's ZD9 flagship [see HCC #282], so there is some blooming around bright objects held on dark backgrounds (particularly noticeable when you view off-axis). For the most part, however, images are even.

A key attribute of the X1 Extreme processor is image clarity. The panel exhibits full-fat 4K detail in all viewing modes; if it's in the source, you'll see in on the screen. A dual database is on hand to aid noise reduction accuracy and fine detail presentation. And as a Triluminos>

1. A similar handset to last year's model, but a new 'Apps' key is given a central position

2. The XF9005 uses a full array local dimming (FALD) backlight







wide colour gamut set, the XF9005 packs a delicious, rich colour punch.

There's a dizzying array of image presets and adjustments to explore. Of the two cinema modes, Cinema Home offers a slightly higher average picture level, and looks rather better. The Standard preset became my go-to for general day-to-day viewing.

A big surprise, however, is Vivid mode. Forget your preconceptions: this preset improves clarity and nuance, and enhances colour depth. The first act of *Okja*, in HDR

# 'On *Transformers: The Last Knight* the glinting robots and not-infrequent explosions look spectacular'

on Netflix, with its dappled forest scenery, finds the XF9005 unleashing tremendous detail. In Vivid mode, that Super Pig looks extra tasty...

Standard image adjustments include colour, brightness and clarity – the latter an umbrella covering Sharpness, Reality Creation and noise reduction. Sharpness is best set at 40 on the sliding scale, which is lower than the default. There's an ambient light sensor, but my advice is to turn this off to maintain image consistency.

Out of the box, the TV's HDR performance is impressive. I measured just over 1,000 nits with a 5 per cent window, dropping to around 750 nits with a 10 per cent window. Even a full-field SDR screen is delivered at just over 380 nits, which is exceptionally bright. An expansive dynamic range means there's far less requirement for tone mapping, and therefore less chance of image errors.

This inherent vibrancy wows on *Transformers: The Last Knight* (4K Blu-ray), where the glinting robots and not-infrequent explosions look spectacular. When the fireballs land in the opening medieval battle sequence, there's a fitting intensity to their impact.

Sony's Object-Based HDR Remaster, a non-negotiable image enhancement (unless you stick to True Cinema), does a consistently good job improving the dynamics of regular HD and SDR 4K.

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG; Dolby Vision (via future firmware) **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; satellite **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; Ethernet; optical digital audio output; AV input; headphone output **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 2 x 10W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,228(w) x 706(h) x 69(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 18.2kg

**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; Bluetooth headphone support; Android TV with Chromecast built-in; 4K X-Reality PRO with dual database processing, X-tended Dynamic Range PRO; X-Motion Clarity; object-based HDR Remaster

#### **PARTNER WITH**



**SONY UBP-X700:** Released this January, Sony's latest 4K disc spinner (£250) is the brand's first to offer Dolby Vision playback – albeit after a firmware update later this year. Stripped of analogue outputs, but SACD playback is retained.

3. The XF9005's twin desktop feet focus on

stability rather than

aesthetic appeal

HDR isn't just about peak highlights, of course; low-luminance handling is important too. Only a select few movies really push the envelope when it comes to spectral highlights, but a good many more have information in the HDR10 grade at less than 100 nits, which can be a real challenge for both LED LCDs and OLED. Sony attempts to solve the issue with Super Bit-Mapping processing to allow the panel to present smoother gradations. Given this is a mid-range model, the onscreen results are impressive.

The much touted X-Motion Clarity innovation, which selectively boosts LED brightness depending on the image to counter the dimming of black frame insertion, works well. Motion handling across the board (the Motionflow menu provides various flavours) is generally excellent.

Where the XF9005 does under-deliver is image lag. Gamers won't be impressed to learn that in Standard mode I measured input lag at 95.8ms. And this only drops to 39.3ms in the dedicated gaming mode, which remains relatively poor.

Audio, too, is unexciting. It's acceptable for everyday use, but with down-firing stereo drivers and no woofer the panel demands to be partnered with something a little more cinematic for movie night. The power output claim is a meagre  $2\times10W$ .

#### Raising the bar

While it's lagging behind rivals (pun intended) when it comes to gaming, and the Android TV OS and general UI are about as slick as sandblasted concrete, the rest of the XF9005's feature set is strong. It's early days for 2018 screens, but a solid 4K HDR picture performance, excellent SDR upscaling, trendy design and admirable motion handling are all reasons to shortlist this model. It sets a high bar for the 4K mid-range ■

#### **HCC VERDICT**



Sony KD-55XF9005

→£1,700 → www.sony.co.uk

WE SAY: First-class image processing, dynamic HDR and a smooth direct LED backlight make this mid-range 4K LED TV a must-see. Android OS doesn't impress, though.

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**Ed Selley** admires the power and control of this moody-looking seven-channel AV receiver

# NAD and Dirac's lucky seven

NAD is entering the 3D audio premium AVR market with its T 777 V3. As the name suggests, this is the latest revision to the 777 platform. However, changes are significant enough that it could have been marketed as an all-new model and I wouldn't have felt aggrieved.

At its core, the T 777 V3 is a seven-channel design. These channels can be allocated as 7.1 or 5.1.2, with support for Dolby Atmos at the time of review and DTS:X compatibility in the pipeline.

Of course, these days any premium AVR limiting its user to just seven channels is going to get some odd looks, so it's no surprise to see the T 777 V3 featuring phono preouts

for 5.2.4, 7.2.2 and 7.2.4 support via external power amplifiers – products that NAD itself is well known for.

Decoding is via six HDMI connections (one of which is on the front panel). All support 4K passthrough with HDCP 2.2 and HDR10. As with DTS:X, compatibility with Dolby Vision and HDR10+ formats is in the works via a firmware update. The HDMI inputs join to two outputs.

The amplification of the T 777 V3 is rated at 80W per channel which, notionally at least, puts it behind most rivals. The wrinkle to this is that NAD quotes the 80W figure as all channels driven into 8 ohms at a low distortion of 0.08% THD. In reality, the T 777 V3 is probably better endowed than much of the competition.

While NAD's high-end Masters Series amps use Hypex's nCore Class D amplification, the T 777 features a Class AB output stage, connected to a toroidal power supply and NAD's 'PowerDrive' circuit, which the company says allows for 'very high dynamic power' while keeping distortion low.

A row of cooling fans are fitted to the underside of the receiver but these have either not kicked in during testing or are impressively silent in use. Indeed, NAD says its fan circuit has a neat trick, cutting out during a quiet scene in a movie to stop the sound of gushing air upsetting the ambience.

Compared to rivals that have nine, 11 or even 13 channels of onboard power, the T 777 V3 is going to be more expensive to run in 'full fat' mode. But even if you are only planning a smaller configuration, the lure here is of better-quality amplification.

There's another lure, actually. A big revision to the specification for this V3 model is the removal of the old Audyssey EQ system and the introduction of Dirac Live. Well, sort of. As standard, the T 777 V3 comes with Dirac Live LE, which performs analysis between 20Hz and 500Hz (where most room nodes are likely to lurk). For an extra \$99, you can upgrade to the full Dirac Live suite and gain correction between 20Hz and 20kHz. NAD supplies a calibration microphone and setup software with some useful prompts.

Another aspect of the receiver's specification that is noteworthy is support for Bluesound's excellent BluOS system (Bluesound and NAD both being brands under the Lenbrook umbrella). BluOS allows for UPnP streaming, internet radio and access to pretty much any streaming service you can think of (and some you can't). It also permits input, volume and basic settings adjustment of the T 777 V3. One criticism, however, is that the BluOS module isn't built into the chassis, but is instead on a slightly ungainly looking USB dongle.

This can at least be hidden out of sight. Whether you'll want to hide the receiver itself is open to debate. In true NAD form, it is another grey box but I find myself rather liking it. The front panel layout is logical and the build quality is first-rate. You also get an excellent multifunction backlit remote which makes control simple; one feature it has that's hugely useful is the ability to adjust the centre, surround and subwoofer levels on the fly, which can give muffled dialogue a quick boost without reverting to the settings menu.

If you're a masochist, you can use a smaller 'convenience' handset instead, which is as dreadful here as it is on a number of other NAD devices.

#### Taking everything in its stride

Initially running without any Dirac correction, there are some aspects of the T 777 V3's performance that are rather more familiar to the two-channel side of my life than the AV one. Ask me to find one word to sum up to this AVR's performance and it would be 'unflappable.'

This is an exceptionally even-handed and controlled performer. It manages to unpick even the densest multichannel soundmix without any apparent struggle. The aural insanity of the first beach assault in *Edge of Tomorrow* (Blu-ray) is conveyed with an immaculate sense of order and effects placement. Some rivals are able to convey a little more ballistic energy, but they often sound ragged by comparison.

In a 5.1.2 Dolby Atmos configuration, the T 777 V3 brings this same effortless control to Mad Max: Fury Road (Blu-ray). The detail retrieval it manages as a matter of course is seriously impressive, and thanks to there being pretty much nothing in the way of distortion from the onboard amplification, you can wind the levels right up with only the potential rage of your neighbours to contend with. This makes it even easier to enjoy the finer subtleties of the soundtrack, like the outrageous noise that Immortan Joe's Gigahorse makes during the chase through the canyon. And the advantage of the NAD's masterful approach to effects placement is that

#### **AV INFO**

PRODUCT:
7-channel Dirac EQ
AVR with 11-channel
processing

POSITION:
Below NAD's Masters
Series, above the
T 758 V3 receiver

PEERS: Arcam AVR550; Anthem MRX 720

1. The AVR's design is best described as 'understated'...

2. NAD's backlit remote is brilliantly easy to use





it is no less effective when viewing things that are not quite as anarchic. The newsroom sequence in journo drama *Christine* (Blu-ray) is relayed with genuine realism and an ear for detail, again allowing you to slip into the movie without distraction.

All this control and cohesion means, ironically, that the impact of the Dirac optimisation isn't as night-and-day as you might expect. Running the software helped to even out a 40Hz room peak in my setup, and a slight dip in the 200Hz region, and further improves the sense of soundstage handling and refinement. Yet an important aspect of Dirac is that applying it doesn't affect the basic character of your speakers or rob them of any of their sense of energy.

The 'RoomFeel' Target EQ curve that NAD supplies with the LE software is worth investigating. Through my Elipson speakers, there was an increase to the sense of 'body' in the performance. You might construe this as adding warmth, but it doesn't adversely affect the impressive speed and dynamics that the T 777 V3 has in spades. With a larger set of speakers that interact with a room more vigorously, or an 11-channel array with all those extra reflections to take care of, I imagine that both Dirac and the target curve will have a greater effect on the performance, and impart more of a character shift than has been the case with my audition.

Tying up the T 777 V3's apparent desire to be all things to all people, it's no slouch musically either. Listening to a hi-res FLAC of David Byrne's *American Utopia* on Qobuz sees this receiver deliver a performance that is light on its

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

**DOLBY ATMOS:** Yes **DTS:X:** No (but promised via future firmware) **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes. 7.1-channel **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes. 11.2 phono **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 7 x 80W (into 8 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes. Zone 2, 3 and 4 **AV INPUTS:** 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial) **HDMI:** Yes. 6 x inputs; 2 x outputs **COMPONENT VIDEO:** No **VIDEO UPSCALING:** No **DIMENSIONS**: 435(w) x 425(d) x 172(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 20.5kg

**FEATURES:** MDC Modular Construction enables future hardware updates; Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; Ethernet; USB input; RS-232; 12V trigger in/out; Dirac Live LE EQ/room optimisation (upgradable to Dirac Live) with supplied mic; BluOS integration (via dongle) for hi-res streaming, multiroom integration and app control; intelligent cooling fans; HDCP 2.2; Class AB amplification

#### **PARTNER WITH**



PSB IMAGINE XA: For Atmos upfiring speakers, NAD's sister-brand PSB sells these dual-driver modules. We rate them a solid combination of value and performance—the £350 per pair price means adding a quartet isn't too prohibitive.

feet and wickedly entertaining. This receiver is more musical than its gruff exterior might have you believe.

#### Potently powerful

Choosing the T 777 V3 is a balancing act of features versus ability. For the same money, you can have more channels onboard, more inputs and be good to go with DTS:X — the NAD does currently feel slightly like a work in progress. But put into action, this premium seven-channel AVR is easy to live with day-to-day, potently powerful and will drop neatly into most rooms thanks to its advanced onboard room optimisation. It warrants being on any shortlist at the price ■

#### **HCC VERDICT**



NAD T 777 V3

→ £2,500 → nadelectronics.com

WESAY: Superb sound quality and slick usability should put this seven-channel AVR on your radar, although the current lack of DTS:X decoding might be a deal-breaker.



- 3. For the T 777 V3, NAD replaces Audyssey EQ with Dirac
- 4. A lack of legacy video inputs makes this back-plate look a little sparse



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# Big speakers, big sonics

If you're going to drop the best part of £7,500 on a 5.1 speaker system, you've every right to expect – as Doc Brown put it in the expletive over-dubbed print of *Back to The Future* – some serious 'stuff'. And few speaker makers do stuff more seriously than Bowers & Wilkins.

With its new 700 Series lineup, it appears the UK company didn't think holding back was an option. I'll get to the wealth of trickle-down technology in a moment but, in essence, the new 700 effectively replaces the old CM (Compact Monitor) line, and fashions itself as the affordable alternative to the company's flagship 800 Series Diamond range. And if you think a total spend of £7,346 (and adding £400 for the 705 S2's dedicated stands, not photographed) is playing fast and loose with the meaning of 'affordable', bear in mind that this handsome gang of glossy black boxes undercuts a single pair of 802 D3s by £8,754. If the 800 Series Diamond magic dust claim isn't just marketing fluff, the omens are surely good.

B&W doesn't do home cinema speaker packages with incentivising discounts but it does supply all the ingredients for a pick 'n' mix approach and, but for the inclusion of an even bigger subwoofer, what you see here is about as good as it gets for an immersive B&W ensemble that starts with a 7. Let's begin with the big, three-way 702 S2 floorstander (£3,300 per pair) at the front, as these showcase neatly what the new 700 series is all about.

#### **Tech-tastic tweeter**

Perhaps the one thing that most obviously mirrors the 800 Series' flagship technology is the de-coupled tweeter that sits on top of the main enclosure in its own bullet-shaped 'Solid Body' housing. Visually, it's almost a dead ringer. Inside, however, B&W tasks carbon rather than diamond to do the 25mm dome's bidding, which is one of the reasons the system's price is altogether more earthbound.

Performance-wise, this new carbon dome seeks to bridge the gap between the aluminium double dome used in the company's 600 Series range and the diamond dome that crowns the 800 Series Diamond. In other words, it's the best B&W can do without resorting to exotic materials and unavoidable expense.

This carbon dome has two parts. The front part is a 300-micron aluminium dome stiffened by a PVD (Physical Vapour Deposition) coat of carbon. This is teamed with a 300-micron carbon ring bonded to the inner face of the structure. The resulting stiffness, resistance to distortion and light mass is claimed to push the first break-up point to 47kHz, well out of harm's way unless you were born on Krypton.

### 'What you see here is about as good as it gets for a B&W ensemble with an earthbound price tag'

As for the de-coupled, bullet-shaped housing, it's milled from a solid mass of aluminium to make a hefty structure that weighs 1kg and is exceptionally inert. Moreover, it acts as a heatsink and is de-coupled from the main box in exactly the same way as the 800 Series Diamond via what looks to be a tiny, but quite stiff, nib of rubber. It also has the benefit of looking extremely cool, but makes using these speakers with any Atmos upfiring module a bit awkward.

#### The secret sauce

Moving down the speaker, the 5.5in 'Continuum cone' midrange driver provides another physical link with 800 models, and confirmation that B&W has shifted away from Kevlar weave as a diaphragm for its premium lines. Although the newer woven composite cone material itself is B&W's little secret, the underlying concept evolves that for which Kevlar was first used: overcoming the deleterious effects of a conventional cone's transition from pistonic motion to break-up modes.

B&W calls it 'optimised and controlled flexibility', and the intended upshot is a cleaner, sweeter, more open

#### **AV INFO**

**PRODUCT:** 5.1-channel floorstanding speaker package

POSITION: One rung below B&W's 800 Series Diamond range

Monitor Audio Gold 300 AV

1. The 700 Series replaces B&W's CM lineup

and neutral mid-band performance. It's hard to say how much of a helping hand the new midrange driver's FEA (Finite Element Analysis)-optimised aluminium chassis lends to this, but it's certainly a step up from the heavier and less-stiff zinc chassis used in the outgoing CM Series.

The driver derives further benefit from a tuned mass damper on the front face of the chassis to soak up any remaining resonance in the structure. And, adapted from the system used by the 800 Series Diamond, it also enjoys a degree of de-coupling from the main enclosure.

The 702 S2 is a tall and imposing tower, so there's room for no fewer than three 6.5in bass drivers — and, again, elements are trickled down from the 800 Series Diamond. The principles behind the so-called Aerofoil cone — its variable-thickness diaphragm profile determined by advanced computer modelling — are the same, but where the 800 has carbon fibre skins, the 702 uses paper. And the sandwich filling, which allows the variable thickness, is EPS rather than syntactic foam. It's enough for B&W to claim nothing less than a 'dramatic' uplift in bass performance from the previous CM Series.

#### Talented standmount

Surround duties can sometimes be under-appreciated, to the extent they're entrusted to the most humble standmount within arm's reach. That's not the case here. The 705 S2 (£1,800 per pair) is the star standmount in the 700 Series range and the only other model with a solid body, top-mounted, decoupled carbon tweeter.

### 'This setup has formidable power and precision, seamless integration and a beautifully open mid-band'

There's just the one rear-facing bass reflex port instead of the 702 S2's two, and one 6.5in Continuum midbass driver to keep the tweeter company but, sampled in stereo on the end of my reference hi-fi system, this speaker has talent to burn.

On LFE duty in this 5.1 array, and with a name that sounds like a modern take on 007's favourite Aston Martin, is the sealed DB4S active subwoofer. B&W could have supplied an even beastlier bass engine (the dual-driver DB2D, for instance), but the forward-firing 10in Carbon Aerofoil driver and 1,000 watts of Class D amplification of the DB4S is deemed a more natural fit for the 700 Series — and even without the dual woofer arrangement of the DBxD models, it still claims a low-end reach of 10Hz at -3dB.

As well as requiring you to puff out your cheeks and make a grunting noise as you heave it into position, it's a smart sub, too, packing a digital preamp section with automatic dynamic EQ, plus the option of Room EQ and custom/preset modes via B&W's DB Subwoofer app (which also allows for level control via your smartphone). The finish is piano black gloss here, of course, but the 700 Series' other styles (gloss white and Rosewood) are also available.

Finally, the all-important centre speaker. The HTM71 S2 is a sizable, three-way, rear-vented job, with a pair of 6.5in bass drivers, 4in Continuum FST midrange unit and, yet again, that new-tech carbon dome tweeter. There's a







smaller two-way HTM72 in the 700 Series armoury but, to be honest, I like the look (and weight) of this one.

I should mention the very well made and finished FS-700 S2 stands for the 705 S2s (actually, they can be used with any of the 700 Series standmounts). I stuck with my own ancient Slate Audio stands for an initial stereo audition, but with the whole setup then moved to my bigger cinema room, I have to admit the dedicated B&W stands do look a good deal smarter, if not quite as chunky.

#### Rolling thunder, pouring rain

EQ-ing the beefy DB4S for this large space proved a doddle, especially with the smartphone app to guide you. And, what with the generous internal volume and three bass drivers of the 702 S2s, together with the more than ample oomph of my Denon AVR-X4300 receiver, I have a hunch rumbling bass isn't going to be a problem.

So, in the spirit of thunder and lightning, cue the Blu-ray of Thor: Ragnarok, not least because the audio track has attracted some stick in these pages for sounding strangely hemmed in and underwhelming, a comparatively muted accompaniment to the larger-than-life, butt-kicking action on screen. Well, all I can say is, I didn't really notice. When Thor and Surtur go for it in the opening scenes, I can almost feel the heat and flying embers.

Let me put it another way. B&W's 700 Series 5.1 is simply immense – system Viagra for a sagging soundtrack, an open window for Dunkirk-level awesomeness when it presents (we'll get to that film in a moment). It's something of a truism that you can never have enough bandwidth and you can never have enough resolution, but there's so much of each on tap here it's hard to imagine needing more.

Perhaps the most impressive thing is the sheer, unadulterated intelligibility. Everything is so easy to understand and plausible. It sounds as if stuff is in the room with you: palpable, tactile, full of texture, colour and dynamic life.

Breaking it down, this speaker ensemble clearly has formidable resolving power and precision, seamless integration front-to-rear and a beautifully open, expressive and lucid mid-band. The clean, extended upper frequencies are naturally textured and free from grain, gloriously detailed yet unforced. And the size of the soundstage it's capable of weaving – during the beach strafing of *Dunkirk* (Blu-ray) for example – almost defies belief.

The subwoofer's most obvious contribution (apart from giving explosions compelling weight and violence and indulging the mixing engineer's wildest infra-bass fantasies) is its seductively sumptuous yet supple quality with music. Bruno Mars' Finesse (CD) has never sounded more full-on or, indeed, dripping in finesse. Tempo and rhythm, so often the downfall of AV speaker systems, is truly nailed here.

It all comes together to thrilling and deeply satisfying effect with the Blu-ray of Blade Runner 2049. Opinions might differ over the film itself, but there can be no denying the potency and compound complexity of the film's 5.1 mix in the hands of this B&W setup. It's immersive, powerful and yet incredibly subtle. During the sequence with Blade Runner K and his holographic girlfriend Joi on a rooftop (Chapter 2), the ambient falling rain is so convincing and the droplet splashes so specific and varied (acquiring a hollow metallic ring when they fall on an unseen drainpipe over your shoulder, for instance), it actually gave me a little shiver.

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

**B&W 702 S2 DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 1in Carbon Dome tweeter; 1 x 6in Continuum cone midrange driver; 3 x 6.5in Aerofoil profile bass drivers **ENCLOSURE**: Twin-ported (rear) **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED)**: 45Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED)**: 90dB **POWER HANDLING** (CLAIMED): 30W-300W DIMENSIONS: 200(w) x 1,087(h) x 337(d)mm WEIGHT: 29.5kg

**B&W HTM71 S2 DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 1in Carbon Dome tweeter; 1 x 4in Continuum cone midrange driver; 2 x 6.5in Aerofoil profile bass drivers **ENCLOSURE:** Rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 50Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY** (CLAIMED): 89dB **POWER HANDLING** (CLAIMED): 30W-100W DIMENSIONS: 590(w) x 225(h) x 285(d)mm WEIGHT: 18.3kg

#### **B&W 705 S2**

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 1in Carbon Dome tweeter; 1 x 6.5in Continuum cone midbass driver **ENCLOSURE:** Ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 50Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 88dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 30W-120W **DIMENSIONS:** 200(w) x 407(h) x 285(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 9.3kg

#### DB4S (subwoofer)

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in Aerofoil cone bass driver ENCLOSURE: Sealed FREQUENCY **RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 10Hz-350Hz (-3dB) **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 1,000W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No. (But control via DB Subwoofer app) **DIMENSIONS:** 360(w) x 377(h) x 368(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 26kg **FEATURES:** Stereo XLR input; stereo phono input; 2 x 12V trigger; RS-232; digital preamp with Dynamic EQ; app-based setup

#### **PARTNER WITH**



**DUNKIRK:** This WW2 drama featured our favourite Blu-ray soundmix of 2017. a massively detailed and precise DTS-HD MA 5.1 track that dovetails perfectly with the onscreen visuals. It gets the best out of B&W's premium package.

At the other end of the decibel scale, the visceral intensity of the Las Vegas attack (Chapter 12) still has me flinching, even though I've watched the movie several times. The sub's capacity for heavy-fisted damage is perfectly showcased as it teams up with the concretetrashing transient surround effects to deliver mayhem and gathering rubble with extreme prejudice. Hans Zimmer and Benjamin Wallfisch's post-Vangelis soundtrack has muscle and menace in equal measure, but also a gentle lilting beauty as *Tears in Rain* from the original *Blade Runner* is reprised in the final scene. It all leaves me exhilarated but rather exhausted.

#### Hard to beat

It's tempting to label this speaker system a diminishing returns special. Yes, it's possible to put together an even more resolute/dynamic/musical speaker package (one based around B&W's 800 Series would do the trick) but I reckon you'd need to spend much, much more to achieve any significant improvement. £7,500 is a lot of money but, honestly, it doesn't get much better than this ■

#### **HCC VERDICT**



B&W 700 Series 5.1

→£7,350 → www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

WESAY: Not for the faint of heart or tight of space, but this system's bold style and superb sonics win the day. Even at this price, the 700 Series 5.1 is fine value.

- 2. Both floorstander and standmount models feature decoupled tweeters
- 3. Got spare amp channels? The B&W 700 Series speakers can be bi-wired
- 4. The HTM71 centre speaker is a three-way driver design

**Richard Stevenson** finds 13 reasons to fall in love with this big Denon amp

# All guns blazing

Denon's AVC-X8500H has taken the AV amplifier concept and turned it up to 11. Well, more than that actually. With a claimed 1,950W spread through its 13 independent channels, plus every key AV feature currently available, this is the undisputed champion of AV specification trumps. But do you need so many channels of power on tap?

#### **AV INFO**

**PRODUCT:** 13-channel networked AV

amplifier

POSITION:
Top of the 2018

Denon range

DEEDS:

Anthem MRX 1120; Denon AVR-X6400H; Pioneer SC-LX901 Yes, as it turns out. While you can divert some of those powered channels to a second or third stereo zone, the real magic is what they can do in your cinema.

Object-based audio formats map sound into your room, making the most of however many speakers you have. The more the merrier. Or, rather, the more speakers, the more accurate the positioning of effects and more believable the ambience of the movie. Dolby Atmos uses up to 64 speakers in commercial cinemas, although that might be trickier to pull off in your home theatre.

Starting with a typical 11-channel (7.2.4) setup, this new Denon allows you to add an extra two channels with a number of different placement options. Using them as front height channels for 7.2.6 could have real benefits in bolstering front-end solidity. If you have got a very wide room, you could configure them as front-width channels in a 9.2.4 set up to ensure a spacious front soundstage.

The Denon's options are copious but not endless. Within the initial menu you do have a finite number of speaker configurations to choose from and that could mean some fudging is required. I could not simply add front height speakers to my existing 7.2.4 configuration, which uses four overhead ceiling speakers. The nearest I could set in the menu was front-height, mid-top and rear-height speakers.

There are several more unusual configuration options – including Auro-based setups – but it is not always obvious how to marry the amp's configuration to your layout.

And there are bugs in the setup that need ironing out. For example, you can set six in-ceiling 'top' speakers but that disables Surround Back, so you only get 11 channels. I also managed to establish a five-channel/surround back/eight height-channel config, which to those with a spare hand for some extra fingers, is 15 channels. Hmmm.

While there are 15 sets of terminals on the back, just to add to the confusion, it's not until you navigate to the



1. Might it be time for a Denon remote revamp?

2. There's little visual difference between this and the X6400H





amplifier assignment page that you discover the AVC-X8500H has disabled the SB channels. The advantage of the 15 terminals, however, is that you could switch between an Atmos-style configuration (top speakers) and an Auro-3D one (height speakers) much more easily than on previous Auro-enabled Denon models.

The irony in all this speaker menu confusion is that with object-based audio formats, it really shouldn't matter where you place your speakers within reason. Top-spec hardware should simply measure the room and calculate where your speakers are, rather than have to be told.

Gripe over, though, because outside of that setup malarkey, this Denon is a proper stunner.

#### No more twiddling the dial

When it comes to features, I'll begin with what the AVC-X8500H doesn't have. This is a short list, and it's an AM/FM tuner. As Denon's naming nomenclature testifies, the AVC-X8500H is not an AVR. Denon has taken the decision to oust the FM tuner section completely, so in the strictest sense this is no longer a receiver. We'll gloss over that the amp's internet radio tuner can access thousands of stations, including all your FM favourites. And the fact that the front display window proudly states 'AV Surround Receiver' when you boot it up.

Back to what it does offer, and the spec sheet runs long. This is a 13.2-channel AV amplifier, armed with Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D and able to passthrough 4K HDR. It offers networked streaming, Apple Airplay, HEOS multiroom integration and an 8-in, 3-out HDMI stage. Other connections are gold-plated and comprehensive.

Build quality is fabulous and the Denon looks just as good underneath the hood. In here you'll find 32-bit AKM AK4490EQ DACs and a powerful DSP engine based on a pair of SHARC dual-core chipsets. No surprise, then, that the X8500H is a fairy large and heavy beast, and it

runs quite toasty warm when pushed, so allow for plenty of ventilation space.

Setup and room EQ is courtesy of Audyssey's MultEQ XT32 FIR-based filter system (not 'parametric' as I have stated erroneously recently...). More advanced EQ tools can be unlocked if you invest in the Audyssey Editor app.

Control is via the familiar Denon backlit LCD remote, the Denon 2016 AVR Remote app, the Denon HEOS app or, once Amazon Alexa voice control via the Smart Home Skill arrives through firmware, simply shouting at it.

Other expected touches include IP and RS-232 control for custom installs. There's also the ability to control the X8500H with your TV's remote, and a dedicated Smart Menu onscreen. After a couple of weeks with the amp I also grew to like the Quick Select keys. These tie up sources and their preferred sound modes at the touch of a single button.

#### Solid as a rock

Yeah, but how does it sound? Quite, quite amazing in fact. This Denon is clean, punchy and dynamic with a solidity to





its imaging that makes even two-channel recordings sound wonderfully three-dimensional.

The balance is neutral but lacks nothing in grunt and drive when the volume knob gets turned to the right. That gorgeously crafted power supply, visible through the casework, supplies all those channels with enough juice not to run out of steam when the going gets tough.

Using a 7.2.6 setup with front height channels, the Denon mapped Atmos-encoded material efficiently onto every speaker. And those front heights really worked well in filling the void above the screen in my fairly long but narrow room.

Doing A/B comparisons with and without the front heights in play is a palaver involving reconfiguring the speaker menu, but is also quite an eye-opener. Largescale panning sequences like the planes going overhead in *Unbroken* (Blu-ray) benefit

greatly. The aircraft seem to start further away in the front distance before they get closer, or disappear further into the foreground when heading in the other direction.

Dialogue was improved too, the effect reminding me very much of Audyssey's DSX front-height channel implementation. With my centre speaker set on a low stand, both systems effectively pull the dialogue upwards, which better centres voices on the screen.

Moreover, the additional front heights deliver a much greater sensation of three-dimensional sound generally, increasing spatial height well above the listening plane. Even with action-fest movies like *Justice League* (Blu-ray), where the sound director was clearly paid on a decibel-per-speaker basis, the effect is noticeable in enlarging the soundstage.

The insect-like wings of the Parademons are particularly impressive. Their fast, flighty movement is crafted with amazing precision in the room, and with your eyes closed you can virtually point to a creature's intended location. They also seemed to fly higher than when running the system as simply 7.2.4. In short, I found having extra speakers to fill the void behind and above the main front array mightily useful in my setup. With a bigger space, could adding them as additional front width channels create a similar effect in bolstering the horizontal scale of the soundstage? Quite possibly.

#### From 5 to 13

Thanks to the Denon's cracking processing, mapping more mundane sound formats onto this mighty 13-channel system is equally fun. Having originally bought the 3D BD of *Justice League* only to discover it packed a vanilla Dolby Digital 5.1 mix, it was fairly easy to compare the two discs. The genuine Atmos sound wins comfortably, but the AVC-X8500H is a master of upscaling 5.1 platters into something resembling immersive 3D audio. Switching to

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

**DOLBY ATMOS:** Yes **DTS:** X: Yes **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** Yes. 7.1 phono audio inputs **MULTICHANNEL PRE-OUT:** Yes. 15.2-channel **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 13 x 150W (into 8 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes. Zone 2 and 3 **AV INPUTS:** 4 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x coaxial, 2 x optical) **HDMI:** Yes. 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs **COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes. 3 x inputs; 1 x output **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes. To 4K **DIMENSIONS:** 434(w) x 482(d) x 195(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 23.3kg

**FEATURES:** Audyssey MultEQ XT32 calibration; Auro-3D processing; hi-res audio file playback; Wi-Fi; Ethernet; Bluetooth; TuneIn radio; Apple AirPlay; HEOS multiroom integration; USB input; Audyssey Editor App compatible; Android and iOS app control; Amazon Alexa voice control (via future firmware); mono-block power amp construction; compressed audio restorer

#### **PARTNER WITH**



**OPPO UDP-205:** Tag team Denon's impressive AV amp with an equally impressive beast of a Blu-ray player. This audiophile Oppo (£1,400) supports Dolby Vision 4K playback, physical and digital hi-res audio, and smuggles in a headphone amp, too.

the Peony Pavilion scene in the DVD of *House of Flying Daggers* – another Dolby Digital 5.1 mix – and this amp brings it alive with added space and punch right down to the lowest registers of my subwoofers.

(With such older discs I preferred Dolby Surround's slightly cleaner and open take on the effect rather than the heavier upmix of DTS Neural:X, but your mileage may vary).

Yet it is with Dolby Atmos and DTS:X material that the Denon really shows its mettle as the class-leading AV amp of the moment. Spin anything and it beguiles. The Atmos track on *La La Land* (UHD Blu-ray) is woefully shy when it comes to height information throughout, yet the AVC-X8500H digs into the soundtrack's subtleties and nuances with ease. Dialogue is crisp and articulate; the musical numbers are funky and infectious. Some scenes in particular are so successful at evoking the mellow feeling of an LA jazz club that I almost booked myself a flight out there.

#### Meet the new boss

After a few weeks it was patently clear that Denon's new model sets the current benchmark for integrated AV amplifiers and does so at a relatively affordable price. Try to get this level of functionality anywhere else and you'll face a higher bill and a separate processor/power amp(s) combination to wrestle with.

It's a brilliant addition to Denon's portfolio, but you have to decide if you really need it. Whether 13 channels are going to work for you significantly better than 11 channels may well depend on the size and shape of your listening environment. For my long, narrow room, adding front height speakers was night and day better ■

#### **HCC VERDICT**



Denon AVC-X8500H

→£3,300 → www.denon.co.uk

WESAY Denon's feature-packed 13-channel AV amplifier is complex to set up but delivers the most immersive surround sound yet from a single box.

- 3. As a sign of its complexity, this 13-channel amp offers 15 speaker terminals
- 4. Lift the flap to reveal an HDMI input, plus headphone and setup mic sockets

#### **AV INFO**

PRODUCT: Single-chip 4K DLP projector with HDR

#### POSITION-

Currently the most premium Vivitek projector available in the LIK

PEERS: Optoma UHD60; Epson EH-TW9300 Vivitek's first 4K projector puts the brand back on the map, suggests John Archer

# Mid-priced 4K marvel

1. Vivitek's handset is brightly backlit and sensibly laid out

2. The HK2288 is the brand's 4K DLP debut

After finding it difficult in the past to maintain a consistent foothold in the UK's notoriously tough home cinema/media room projection market, Taiwanese brand Vivitek now has a committed distributor keen to show British movie fans what its DLP models can do. Which, on the evidence of the well-priced HK2288, is a heck of a lot.

This projector is the latest in a rapidly growing line of affordable 4K DLP models using Texas Instruments' XPR fast-switching technology. The imaging chip isn't native 4K (it incorporates 4.15m mirrors), but Tl's proprietary processing claims to deliver two discrete pixels for each mirror – resulting in a 4K picture. From my experience, the technology gets closer to a true 4K experience than any rival 'pseudo' technology – and has been certified as 'real 4K' by America's Consumer Technology Association.

The best thing about 4K DLP technology from a consumer point of view is its affordability. The Vivitek HK2288 sets you back just £2,500, and supports playback of the industry standard high dynamic range HDR10 format. Even more affordable rivals are now coming to market, of course...

#### Sizing it up

The projector is small enough not to overwhelm either a typical coffee table or your ceiling, but isn't of the compact, portable ilk. Curved edges give it a classy appearance, while side-mounted vents link to its internal cooling fans — be aware that these make a fair bit of noise with the lamp set to Boost mode for HDR playback.

Connections are found on the rear panel. Unusually, there are three HDMI inputs, and each of these can accommodate 18Gbps data streams. There's also a USB port for powering a Chromecast or other streaming dongle, and a 3.5mm audio output (the projector carries a built in 10W mono speaker). However, there's no 12V trigger output, which is a potential deal-breaker for anyone already running an automated screen setup.

Accompanying the PJ is one of the more helpful remote controls I've encountered.

It's a comfortable size, and its well labelled buttons light up brightly when pressed.

Setup flexibility is fair for the price, but not outstanding. Optical zoom extends to 1.5x (providing a 1.39–2.09:1 throw ratio), and is joined by vertical image shifting. Focusing your picture is done via an impressively responsive lever on the lens's front.

The HK2288's onscreen menus aren't very intuitively organised, but do contain enough adjustments to keep tweakers happy if you hunt them down. And hunt them down you should, for two main reasons.

#### Play time

First, out of the box my pictures contained a fairly distinct green tone that needed to be dialled away. Second, to get the best out of the HK2288 you'll need to commit to changing its HDR settings pretty regularly. With its reasonably high claimed brightness of 2,000 Lumens and promising claimed contrast ratio of 1,000,000:1, the HK2288 is more capable than arguably any sub-£3,000 projector of making HDR fun to watch. But only if you put in some legwork.

For instance, if you're watching an Ultra HD Blu-ray that's been mastered at 1,000 nits or less of peak brightness (as most are), you can get away with selecting the 'Normal HDR' picture preset. If, however, you're watching a title that's been mastered at a higher peak luminance level, you should use the 'Detail HDR' setting, and additionally reduce the brightness and contrast levels (to around 43 and 46 respectively).

With this in mind, it would be nice if the HK2288 does as JVC's latest projectors do,









and tell you what peak brightness each 4K Blu-ray disc has been mastered to. But it doesn't. So all there is to go on is that Warner and Universal titles are more likely to be mastered to 4,000 nits than titles from other studios. As are titles that carry a Dolby Vision master (even though the HK2288 can't decode Dolby Vision's dynamic metadata). I appreciate that this is hardly a bulletproof method. You may then want to have a quick look at a 4K HDR movie and adjust your settings before settling down to watch it in earnest.

#### All aboard the HDR train

Any effort you put into optimising the HK2288 for each title is rewarded with some excitingly good picture quality. There's a lush brightness here that's particularly impressive. The snowy exteriors of *Murder on the Orient Express* (4K Blu-ray) enjoy a high baseline luminance that appears much punchier than the picture you get when watching the same scenes from the SDR 1080p Blu-ray. There's also noticeably more intensity to the brightest parts of the picture – such as the direct shot of the sun in the film's opening sequence, or the various electric light sources on the titular train. One shot of a small train station at night also contains a wider range of light from the image's darkest to brightest parts than budget 4K projectors usually muster.

This brightness opens up *Murder...*'s rich colour palette beyond the reach of the HD Blu-ray – despite the fact there doesn't appear to be anything about the HK2288's RGBRGB colour wheel and optical system that should support a wide colour presentation.

Variations in light are well balanced during HDR viewing. As Poirot walks along the roof of the train against a very bright backdrop of snow and sunshine, there are still healthy levels of colour information and detail in his relatively dark, foregrounded form. He doesn't just become a flat silhouette.

Overall black level performance isn't brilliant, however; dark scenes tend to look quite grey. This is par for the course at this level of the HDR projector market, though, and doesn't stop the HK2288 from providing plenty of detail in *Murder...*'s night-time scenes.

During my initial few hours with the projector, I was concerned by how much it could 'clip' (lose colour and detail in) the very brightest image areas. This is where my earlier advice about adapting the projector to different

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 3 x HDMI inputs; powered USB; 3.5mm audio output; RS-232 **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,000 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** 1,000,000:1 **ZOOM:** 1.5x **DIMENSIONS:** 430(w) x 145(h) x 360(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 9kg

**FEATURES:** Single-chip DLP projection system; 10W built-in mono speaker; 35dB cooling noise in Normal lamp mode; 5,000/3,000-hour lamp-life in Default/Boost lamp modes; multiple HDR presets; colour management; vertical image shifting; 1.39-2.09:1 throw ratio; infrared sensors for remote operation from front/behind

#### **PARTNER WITH**



MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS: Kenneth Branagh's recent Agatha Christie adaptation suffers from some awkward 'action' moments, but offers an image on 4K HDR Blu-ray that makes them easy to ignore...

HDR material comes in. If you opt for a more reined-in light output when viewing the brightest HDR content, the clipping reduces dramatically. And if you're careful enough with the settings, you can achieve this without the picture becoming depressingly dark.

The HK2288 delivers even the smallest, brightest light peaks of HDR pictures while suffering only very slightly with DLP's colour striping 'rainbow effect'. And despite clearly being tuned with HDR in mind, it adapts very well to standard dynamic range playback where an HDR source isn't available. SDR colours still look nuanced and authentic, and — as you'd hope from a projector capable of handling HDR brightness levels so well — the HK2288 has no problem picking out contrast subtleties from SDR sources.

The agility of its light production, together with little sign of single-chip DLP projectors' common fizzing noise issues and some natural-looking motion handling, also helps the HK2288 sell its 4K claims. The weave of Poirot's exquisite suits and each hair of his extraordinary moustache are beautifully rendered from the film's crisp, clean 4K Blu-ray image.

#### Welcome back

Certainly, Vivitek's HK2288 has a few foibles – the built-in speaker doesn't have the scale or projection to be a convincing accompaniment to the HK2288's pictures, for instance; the absence of a 12V trigger is puzzling; and similarly priced models such as Epson's EH-TW7300 offer far greater control over where the PJ can be placed in your room. On the other hand, this projector beguiles with its overall HDR image quality, and is exactly the sort of forward-thinking, aggressively priced and high-performance model Vivitek needed to consolidate its re-emergence on the UK home cinema market. Consider me impressed

#### **HCC VERDICT**



Vivitek HK2288

→£2,500 → www.karma-av.co.uk

WESAY: So long as you invest a little time in it, Vivitek's HK2288 delivers as assured an HDR and 4K picture performance as any affordable DLP projector we've seen.

3. Zoom and lens shift controls are mounted on the PJ's top surface



#### The new Q Series hi-fi speakers

The eighth iteration of this successful range continues to be centred on KEF's legendary Uni-Q driver array, and is now enhanced with a new system design, beefier low-frequency drivers and a new damped tweeter loading tube. The result is superior bass performance and an even more detailed natural sound. Listen for yourself and experience pleasure in high resolution.







John Archer is reminded that OLED isn't the only premium TV technology in town

# QLED TV fights back

Samsung probably thought when it unveiled its debut QLED displays last year that they'd take the world by storm. Surely punters wouldn't be able to resist the unprecedented brightness and colour range delivered by the brand's new metal-clad Quantum Dots? But things didn't turn out that way. Instead, rival OLED sets, bolstered by performance tweaks and wider availability, became the year's 'must-have' TV item.

#### AV INFO

PRODUCT: 65in 4K QLED TV with HDR10+

Currently Samsung's top-of-the-range TV

PEERS: Sony KD-65ZD9; LG OLED65E7; Sony KD-65A1

1. The TV is also offered in 55in and 75in screen sizes

2. A direct backlight gives the QE65Q9FN a bit of bulk

Samsung doesn't seem to have liked this very much. How do I know? Because it's responded with the QE65Q9FN: the best, most future proofed TV I've yet seen.

This pricey 65in flagship emphatically addresses the chief issue that hindered the QLED charge last year: backlighting. All of the brand's TVs in 2017 featured edge LED arrays, but the QE65Q9FN uses more precise direct lighting with local dimming. Samsung doesn't specify the exact number of individually controllable zones, but I think it's around 400-500, a comprehensive amount that should limit the potential for backlight halos/striping cluttering an image.

Samsung has also implemented a new processing technique that gradually reduces the intensity of a dimming zone's light as it approaches its edges, which should also make defined clouds of light around very bright objects less obvious.

There have been improvements to the company's proprietary metal-clad QLED Quantum Dots, too, resulting in a claimed increase in colour purity and range – a full 100 per cent of the DCI-P3 colour space, in fact.

#### Double whammy

These upgrades are delivered while retaining two unique strengths of 2017's QLED models: extreme brightness and remarkable anti-reflection filtering. This screen can hit brightness peaks on a 10 per cent white HDR window of 2,400 nits, which is the highest figure I've seen on a consumer television. The screen filter, meanwhile, soaks up ambient light and reflections from your viewing room with real efficiency. There's probably no other TV around that's as watchable in a bright living room environment.

Samsung has bolstered its smart TV system for 2018. For instance, there's now 'Smart Things' support for monitoring/controlling

compatible appliances on your home network, such as fridges or robot vacuum cleaners. And more effort has been made to include broadcast TV in the TV's content browsing, searching and recommendations utilities.

An onboard Freeview HD tuner is joined by support for the UK's main broadcast catch-up TV apps, as well as 4K and HDR versions of Amazon, Netflix and YouTube. An excellent voice recognition system, meanwhile, provides both control over your TV and spoken-word access to a decent universal search system.

As is the norm with Samsung, connections here are located on an external box.

Physically, the flatscreen QE65Q9FN has a rather unremarkable silver/grey square-edge design, but at least this provides a nondescript frame for a new energy-efficient 'Ambient Mode', which lets you fill the screen with preloaded digital artwork – or one of your own photos – when you're not watching it. You could even take a photograph of your wall and place that in the TV's screen to really minimise the Samsung's impact on your decor...

Possibly this screen's only feature weakness is its lack of support for Dolby Vision HDR. Instead you get HDR10, HLG and the relatively new HDR10+ format.

This could be a deal-breaker for some buyers. However, bear in mind that none of the TVs that support Dolby Vision will, it seems, support the rival HDR10+ format. You need to make a choice.

#### Direct appeal

Does the switch to direct lighting with local dimming transform Samsung's QLED fortunes? You'd better believe it.
Straight away it's clear that this set's black levels are leagues ahead of >



those of any 2017 QLED model. The QE65Q9FN delivers black colours that give OLED a run for its money, even with mixed images where inky blackness is shattered by luminance peaks. This means the final scrap between the assembled heroes and Steppenwolf in the 4K Blu-ray of *Justice League* looks nothing short of mindblowing; a tapestry of incredibly intense HDR whites and colours, and rich blacks.

And the QE65Q9FN can convey *Justice League*'s searing highlights against dark backdrops with scarcely a hint of backlight blooming. In fact, I believe it does a better job of controlling light around standout objects

### 'Samsung has reminded us how good LED TVs can be – this offers the best 4K HDR picture quality I've ever seen'

than any other LCD TV to date, including Sony's stunning ZD9 models. Such ruthless backlight control and inherent brightness (more than double that of any OLED) results in a gloriously dynamic, contrast-rich experience. The screen's peak luminance and canny processing also ensure intense details — such as the harsh lights in Bruce Wayne's jet — look believable rather than clipped and hollow.

#### The colour of magic

Next up: colour. This 65-incher proves sensational when it comes to unlocking the impact of *Justice League*'s expansive palette. Tones across the board are fantastically vibrant, benefitting from the colour 'volume' on tap. But they're stable and balanced too, as opposed to simply pushed, and the screen displays the smallest tonal shift or subtle blend. This raises the feeling of innate sharpness and detail of 4K content.

The QE65Q9FN handles HDR colour blends – even the difficult-to-manage white clouds around the aliens in *Arrival* (Ultra HD Blu-ray) – without any sign of the distracting striping interference witnessed on previous Samsung generations.

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

**3D:** No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HDR10+; HLG **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; satellite HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; RF input; Ethernet; AV input; optical audio output **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 40W **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 2,000 nits **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,405(w) x 830(h) x 39(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 26.7kg

**FEATURES:** USB multimedia playback and recording; Q Processing engine; Smart Things smart home support; Eden 2.0 smart system; voice recognition and control; Ambient Mode for low-powered screen saver; direct lighting with hundreds of dimming zones; QLED technology; 4K HDR VOD apps; One Connect box

#### **PARTNER WITH**



#### **SAMSUNG HW-K950:**

The HW-K950 is approaching two years old but remains the A-lister in Samsung's cast of soundbars. Atmosenabled, with wireless rears and subwoofer for a 5.1.4 array, this £1,200 system sounds sublime.

Rounding out this TV's picture charms are a slightly expanded viewing angle (but by no means the best around), precise and controlled standard dynamic range playback, and an improved version of Samsung's HDR+ system, which converts standard dynamic range content to something approaching HDR.

It's not possible yet to do any meaningful comparisons between HDR10+ and other HDR formats, given that the only HDR10+ source available is currently Amazon Video. Shows such as *The Grand Tour* do look unprecedentedly good on the QE65Q9FN, though. I suspect this TV's core image quality is a factor here, of course.

There are a few areas where Samsung could maybe do more. I couldn't find any combination of motion processing features that delivered motion as natural as that available on Sony's new XF9005 TV (see page 40). And very occasionally parts of an image can flicker quite obviously, as if the TV is struggling to decide which backlighting setup to use. Samsung claims to be working on a fix for this.

Lastly, I found details being marginally crushed out of the picture during dark scenes while using the TV's presets (except for, perhaps, the Movie one). This is fairly easily remedied by nudging up the picture's Gamma.

On a final positive note, this is a powerful audio performer. Its hidden speakers have healthy volume and dynamic range, a decent low-end, and create a coherent sense of audio space that extends well beyond the TV's physical boundaries.

#### Let battle commence

With the QE65Q9FN, Samsung has reminded us how good LED TVs can be. Put simply, it offers the best 4K HDR picture quality I've ever seen – and ups its appeal via a well-engineered smart platform and user-friendly features. The battle for the future of television is back on ■

#### **HCC VERDICT**



Samsung QE65Q9FN

→£3,800 → www.samsung.co.uk

WE SAY: Unprecedented colour and brightness combine with the LED world's best backlight controls to deliver the finest HDR pictures seen to date.

3. The desktop stand doubles as a conduit for the One Connect 'near invisible' cable



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## Why so Blu?

Does a long overdue Dolby Vision firmware update give this affordable 4K deck a boost over the competition? **Steve May** isn't convinced

A front USB port enables flash drive media playback

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

ULTRA HD: Yes HDR: Yes. HDR10; Dolby Vision UPSCALING: Yes. To 2160p MULTIREGION: No, Region B BD/R2 DVD HDMI: Yes. 2 x outputs (one audio-only) COMPONENT VIDEO: No MULTICHANNEL ANALOGUE: No DIGITAL AUDIO: Yes. Optical audio output ETHERNET: Yes BUILT IN WI-FI: Yes SACD/DVD-A: No/No DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 45(h) x 205(d)mm WEIGHT: 1.63kg

**FEATURES:** USB port; smart portal with Netflix and YouTube 4K apps; setup wizard; file support includes MPEG, MKV, MOV, MP3, AIFF, AAC, FLAC, WAV, OGG and WMA



**LG MAY HAVE** relentlessly pursued the premium end of the TV market with its 4K OLED and LED models, but the UP970 is very much cut from the same budget cloth as its previous 2K Blu-ray offerings.

The player is full-width (430mm) but thin. It's anonymously smart, although clearly a commodity product. Don't expect to find the same level of build quality here as on Oppo's premium Dolby Vision players. It's more akin to the Panasonic DMP-UB300 and Samsung UBD-K8500.

As is LG's long-standing want, the UP970 has little stick-on transport buttons positioned beside a front-facing USB port disguised by a tethered cover. There's no on-body status display, just very discreet green and red LEDs.

The rear of the deck is similarly stripped back. There are two HDMI outputs, with the second designated audio-only for use with non-4K capable AV receivers. There's also an optical digital audio output, plus Ethernet

to accompany integrated Wi-Fi.

The supplied IR remote control is short and dumpy. And operationally this player leaves a lot to be desired. The USB reader, for instance, seems unnecessarily fussy. While some thumbdrives were recognised, others weren't.

The player's user interface will be familiar to owners of previous LG Blu-ray hardware, comprising a strip of horizontal graphics designated Movie, Photo, Music, Premium and Settings. Premium is where you'll find just two streaming services, Netflix and YouTube, both of which play in 4K.

The settings menu is somewhat coy, and doesn't proffer much control over what this deck can do. When it comes to display output, there's Auto or forced settings from 480p to 2,160p, plus an HDMI colour option (YCbCr or RGB). There's no user definable bit-depth or chroma output.

Picture performance is average — I noted artefacts vibrating on high-frequency 4K detail on UHD test platters. The player also appears to emphasise grain and noise. You can alter characteristics of the image, using the supplied output modes (Standard, Vivid, Movie and User, the latter allowing you to adjust contrast, brightness, colour and sharpness), but I certainly wouldn't want to entrust image processing to this particular box.

#### **Dolby touches down**

The UP970 now supports both standard HDR10 and Dolby Vision, although the deck waited quite some time for DV to land (and did so after my review period). An early attempt to deploy firmware late last year was abandoned, when it inadvertently switched the region code of all players to the US.

Bizarrely, I actually think the deck looks its best with standard Blu-rays. CG animation *Astro Boy* is all futuristic neon and deep

colours, which the player handles well. Images are smooth without aliasing. Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* tries valiantly to maintain its lush hues. When the GIs land at Guadalcanal, there's band-free colour in the sky, sea and sand. The troops' helmets reveal pock marks and exhibit convincing texture.

The UP970 itself isn't the quietest, being noticeably more noisy spinning UHD discs than standard Blu-rays and CDs. On the plus side, it's at least a speedy loader. A menuheavy movie disc goes from tray to menu in 34 seconds, while a simple concert platter was up and running in just 25.

CD playback is downright poor, with the UP970 making an indistinct hash of the soundstage. A classical suite of strings and oboe had a strange, phasey, drifting quality.

#### **Basically speaking**

After the best part of a year in limbo, the appeal of the UP970 now rests entirely on its Dolby Vision support and its bargain £170 (or thereabouts) price tag. Unfortunately these factors alone don't make up for its many budget shortcomings. Image quality is below the best, build quality basic and audio performance underwhelming

#### **HCC VERDICT**



**LG UP970** 

→£170 → www.lg.com/uk

WESAY: Compatible screen owners will be tempted by this budget deck's Dolby Vision playback, but overall it's uninspiring.

HOME CINEMA CHOICE MAY 2018

**AV INFO** 

Bargain-priced 4K

**Dolby Vision support** 

disc player with

LG's solo Dolby

Vision player

**Panasonic** 

DMP-UB300:

Samsung UBD-K8500

## Hitachi's XXL TV

The size and price tag of this 4K HDR flatscreen certainly make it look tempting on paper. But can it keep its appeal once **John Archer** has put it through its paces?



**THE APPEAL OF** the Argos-exclusive Hitachi 75HL16T64U is brutally simple. It gives you 75 inches of native 4K, HDR-capable pictures for just £1,350. It quickly becomes apparent, though, that its bigscreen bargain status comes with some pretty hefty performance strings attached.

For starters, the design is largely uninspired. The frame is wider than most and wears a dull black finish, while its feet are just there to do a job rather than look stylish.

The rear of the TV sports four carry handles – the first time I've seen these outside of the commercial display world for years. They do aid setup, though, even if they make wall-hanging the set pretty much impossible.

Connections are decent for the 75HL16T64U's money, with highlights being

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Affordable 75in LCD
TV with 4K HDR

POSITION:
The most premium screen in Vestel's
Hitachi-branded
UK range

H75N6800UK

three HDMI inputs and two USBs. Two of the HDMIs handle 4K HDR feeds, but they don't have the capacity to retain HDR support when playing the 60fps images of *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk* (4K BD). The only HDR format supported is HDR10.

Surprisingly for its price, this megascreen

offers a decent smart TV platform that includes support for Netflix and YouTube, as well as the catch-up TV portals for all of the UK's main services within the Freeview Play wrapper.

The Netflix app supports 4K and HDR, but YouTube only seemed to work in HD SDR. Note that there's currently no Amazon Video.

#### Making hard work of HDR

The most important thing you need to know about the 75HL16T64U's picture performance is that it's pretty much a bust with high dynamic range. The set can't sustain nearly enough average or peak brightness to deliver a true HDR effect. It also clips quite severely, robbing the brightest HDR areas of almost all detail.

Watching Elisa's night-time journeys to work in *The Shape Of Water* on 4K Blu-ray reveals a pretty dramatic lack of contrast with HDR content. Dark areas appear washed out and grey, and there's some obvious yellow backlight 'creep' in the corners and sides of the image.

The Shape Of Water's rich, thematic colour palette also catches the TV out. Despite the panel claiming to support a wide colour gamut, colours are flat, murky and unnatural. They're affected, too, by an unpleasant yellowy undertone that I could find no means of completely calibrating away.

#### **SPECIFICATIONS**

3D: No 4K: Yes. 3,840 x 2,160
HDR: Yes. HDR10 TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 3 x HDMI inputs (2 x 4K/HDR
capable); 2 x USB; RF input; Ethernet SOUND
(CLAIMED): N/A BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):
N/A CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (ON STAND): 1,684(w) x 1,026(h)
x 370(d)mm WEIGHT (ON STAND): 37kg

**FEATURES:** Built-in Wi-Fi; USB multimedia playback; network multimedia playback; SmartVue smart engine; Freeview Play built-in; noise reduction; skin tone and colour shift options

#### The smart platform includes a 4K HDR Netflix app

While the set struggles badly with HDR, it's better with 4K SDR than you might perhaps expect. Such pictures – as delivered, for instance, by *Better Call Saul* on Netflix – are crisp and sharp, and are impacted surprisingly little by motion blur. Colours gain a more natural feel, and, ironically, feel richer too.

Black levels, though, are still a problem. So much so that it's not just dark sequences that look greyed over; pretty much any interior scene has its colours muted and depth reduced by the amount of greyness pervading the screen. You can still see pools of excess lighting in the corners, too.

Other issues noted during my tests were limited viewing angles, some so-called 'dirty screen effect' during pans across bright skies or football pitches, and pretty basic 4K upscaling that leaves HD sources looking rather soft and noisy.

The 75HL16T64U's sound is respectable, however. It can go decently loud, benefits from a fair amount of bass, and handles treble details without sounding harsh.

#### Sizing it up

If you're motivated by screen size and screen size alone, then thanks to its 4K sharpness and decent SDR colour performance, you could consider buying Hitachi's 75HL16T64U. Partner it with a product that's good at stripping HDR out of 4K Blu-rays, such as one of Panasonic's premium 4K players, or stick to an SDR diet, and the sheer vastness of its panel may make up for its average blacks.

But an inability to handle HDR material in any pleasing way may lead to a reluctant conclusion no home cinema fan likes to reach: that sometimes size isn't everything

#### **HCC VERDICT**



Hitachi 75HL16T64U

⇒£1,350 → www.argos.co.uk

WE SAY: While it's better than you might expect with 4K sources, this megascreen comes a cropper with HDR and has average black levels.

### Cello C32277T2

There's no need to scare kids witless with campfire stories anymore, says Steve May

**THIS TV FROM** UK manufacturer Cello isn't just another portable. It's battery-powered, which basically means you can take it on the road or install it in the garden on a balmy Summer night. Fully charged, Cello quotes an impressive 10-hour usage when the screen runs on its most eco of settings.

Everything you need, plus a bit more, is in the box. The set even comes with two long-lead LED lights which plug directly into the back. These are bright enough to illuminate a tent or patio.

To the rear you'll find two HDMIs and a PC VGA input. There are four USB ports, two for media playback or recording onto an external hard drive. The other two can recharge a smartphone, or power a streaming dongle if you're setting up in a Wi-Fi hotspot. It's nice attention to detail.

The onboard USB media player handles music and movies, provided the file types



aren't too fancy. I had no problem playing WMV, MPEG, AVI and MOVs, although MKVs weirdly played without audio.

The panel resolution is 720p, and contrast is rated at 4,000:1. Given that it isn't intended for image-critical viewing, this is mostly fine – a bigger display might demand a Full HD pixel count, but would then be far less portable.

#### There's a 22in model available too

Picture vibrancy depends on your chosen Power Save mode. This offers a default option of 6-10 hours use, which significantly dims the screen, or 4-6 hours use, which is a little brighter. There's also a full-brightness Daytime mode. It's only worth running the most economic of power modes when you really need the extended battery.

The idea of a battery-powered TV may sound a bit nutty, but this package works flawlessly in the wild. Image quality isn't the major attraction, but the power saving options are generous and it has useful features. Caravanners should love it

**HCC VERDICT** 



Cello C32277T2

→£300 → www.celloelectronics.com

WWW.AIRPULSEAUDIO.COM/£800

### Airpulse Audio A200

These speakers' premium build and ribbon tweeters have Steve May grinning all over

WHILE THE BRAND may not be familiar, the designer behind Airpulse Audio might be. Phil Jones helped found British hi-fi outfit Acoustic Energy, and was responsible for a run of high-performing designs. These studio-style active monitor speakers are built from comparable sonic DNA.

Build quality and cosmetics are unmistakably premium; the cherry wood cabinetry has a lush, satin-lacquer finish that is definitely living room friendly.

Built into the enclosures are 5.5in midbass drivers with stiff aluminium cones, and horn-loaded ribbon tweeters.

These tweeters are key to the Airpulse Audio A200's outstanding detail. A CD rip of Blondie's *Sunday Girl* is conveyed as fresh and punky; the scritch of guitar and percussive detail sounding as exciting as a night on the town in 1970s New York.

Connectivity is good. The integrated amp on the 'master' speaker (which links to the

'slave' via a supplied cable) links to two analogue inputs (one balanced), plus two digital (optical and coaxial) audio ports. There's also Bluetooth aptX support for direct streaming. A claimed 2 x 10W drives the ribbon tweeters, with 2 x 55W feeding the woofers. The rear panel section has volume, bass and treble knobs, all offering a tactile incremental movement. A remote makes source switching simple.

While the A200s expend most of their energy above 50Hz, that doesn't mean they can't rock. Sweet Leaf (Black Sabbath), remastered in MQA for the Ten Year War boxset, is pure excitement with engaging stereo imaging. The speakers are high-res audio capable, handling signals up to 192kHz.



Audition these if you want active speakers that outperform the usual wireless suspects when it comes to scale and resolution

HCC VERDICT



**Airpulse Audio A200** →£800 → www.airpulseaudio.com

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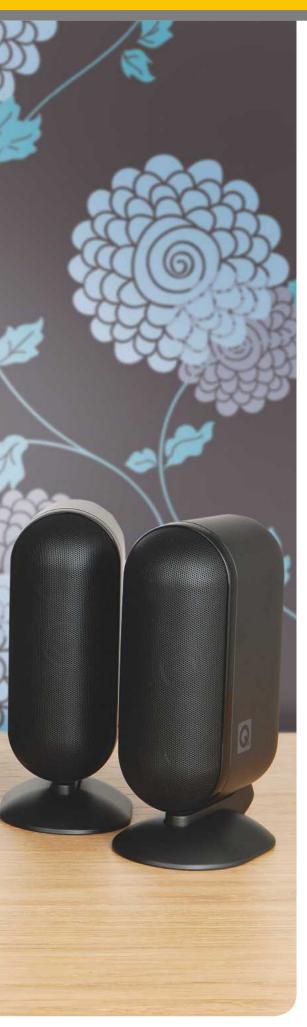
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IN THIS ISSUE we're teaming up with Q Acoustics to give away a 7000i 5.1 Slim speaker package worth £1,000! The latest evolution of the UK speaker expert's premium sub/sat package, it combines class-leading performance with a smart, discreet design (available in black or white finishes). And it could be yours...

#### Return to slender

The Slim revamps Q Acoustics' previous 7000i packages with a new 7060S subwoofer designed to make the system even easier to accommodate in your viewing room. Measuring only 6in deep, and using a sealed box design, you'll have no trouble finding space for it, while the 8in driver, onboard 150W amp and 35Hz frequency response rating deliver tight, well-controlled, cinematic bass.

Joining the 7060S in this multichannel array are Q Acoustics' neatly styled satellite speakers. Each model, whether it's the

'Combine the curved cabinets the soundstage delivering panning with the svelte subwoofer. and you have a package that oozes design class and installation flexibility'

7000LRi for front and surround channels, or the 7000Ci centre speaker, features a two-and-a-half way driver arrangement, mounting a pair of 3in midbass units either side of a ring radiator tweeter.

Each satellite features an integrated, rotatable foot that conceals the speaker



terminals, and cleverly doubles as a discreet wall-mount. Combined with the svelte subwoofer, you have a package that oozes design class and installation flexibility. Optional stands are available for the 7000 satellites, plus a wall-mount bracket for the 7060S

Reviewed in HCC #284, we found the 7000i 5.1 Slim to be a chip off the old Q Acoustics block, describing it as 'sweetsounding'. Performance is excellent, with

> seamless integration throughout effects with aplomb. The array has consistent tonality and digs out clear, crisp detail from movie soundtracks, while the bass hits from the 7060S blend in perfectly. The cabinets may be relatively small, but the overall experience is big and deliciously convincing.

If you fancy being in with a chance of winning this smart-looking, high-performance 5.1 package, simply answer the question below correctly – and good luck! ■

For more information on Q Acoustics' range of loudspeakers, soundbars and audio accessories, visit www.gacoustics.co.uk

#### Be in with a chance of winning the Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Slim by answering the following filmrelated question:

Q: Which Monty Python actor succeeded Desmond Llewelyn as Q in the James Bond film franchise?

A) JOHN CLEESE B) ERIC IDLE C) MICHAEL PALIN

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THE CLOSING DATE for this competition is May 24, 2018. Please read the terms and conditions (below) before sending in your entry.

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## **Focal Sib Evo** Dolby Atmos 5.1.2

TIME ON TEST: Seven months REVIEWER: Mark Craven

LAST SUMMER, THE French audio company Focal entered the arena of Dolby Atmos speakers with a sub/sat system – an idea that no other brand had apparently considered at the time. The likes of KEF, ELAC and PSB had targeted those with speaker setups already in place with upfiring Dolby Atmos modules. Here was a 5.1.2 option designed for those who wanted an entire package.

Eight months on, the Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 remains the only Atmos-equipped sub/sat system you can buy (to the best of my knowledge). How long before other companies follow suit?

#### What's good about it?

There are various sub/sat systems available that cater to those on tight budgets, and some are guilty of reaching so low in terms of pricing that the joy of a discrete multichannel package becomes obscured by poor-quality build and sonics. This isn't the case here: Focal's array carries an £1.100 asking price and for the most part lives up to expectation.

Unpack the Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 and you're greeted by weighty enclosures that seem impressively constructed. They sport full-frontal grilles to protect their drivers, a neat Focal logo on each cabinet, and – while not seamless in construction – can stand up to the odd bump and knock. I know this, because I dropped one of them.

At their heart the speakers are two-way models, using 5in midbass drivers and 0.75in tweeters for a full-range performance. The front L/R pair also carry additional 3in upfiring drivers.

The supplied subwoofer, while not a complete match in terms of aesthetic finish, is of the type that makes installation a breeze. Only 30cm high and with a front port and downward-firing woofer, it's easy to shift around your room should you want to experiment with placement. I found it performed admirably in a front corner position.

#### **AV INFO**

Atmos-equipped sub/sat speaker package

Focal's premium smallscale system

Samsung HW-K950: Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP

Up and running, the system makes a clear case for Dolby Atmos audio, even on this smaller scale. AV purists may tell you that a quartet of ceiling-mounted speakers is the only way to go, but that's a viewpoint that ignores the lifestyles and budgets of the majority of film fans. This system just needs a seven-channel AVR, a bit of effort regards calibration, and a good Blu-ray to show what it can do.

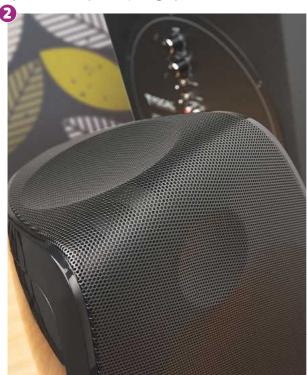
# 'This package makes a clear case for Dolby Atmos audio, with a tangible impact from its height-channel drivers'

There's a precision and poise to its overall delivery that's easy to like, and which serves as a reminder that this isn't a budget option. High-frequency details are crisp but not crass, and the drive and nuance of those 5in midbass drivers a major attraction. The crossover to the Sib Cub Evo subwoofer is well handled.

Atmos impact from this system's duo of heightchannel drivers can be surprisingly tangible. Again and again I've experienced 'lift-your-head' moments as Atmos effects are thrown skywards – a recent runout of horror flick Annabelle: Creation found this 5.1.2 setup cranking up the tension with spine-tingling, creaky FX from around and atop the soundstage. It doesn't challenge the largescale experience of a premium floorstanding package, but it's genuinely impressive how this compact array can place you amidst a soundmix.

# What's not so good about it?

The most obvious drawback here is the overall size of the cabinets – mainly the left and right enclosures with their Atmos upfiring drivers. They're neither small enough to really disappear into a home entertainment system, nor carry the imposing style of standmount



# **SPECIFICATIONS**

Sib Evo Dolby Atmos
DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5in Polyflex midbass; 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter; 1 x 3in full-range
Dolby Atmos driver ENCLOSURE: Rear-ported Dolby Atmos speaker FREQUENCY
RESPONSE (CLAIMED): 65Hz-25kHz (90Hz-20kHz for Atmos driver) SENSITIVITY
(CLAIMED): 90dB POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED): 25W-200W DIMENSIONS: 295(h) x
195(w) x 190(d)mm WEIGHT: 3.25kg

**Sib Evo DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 5in Polyflex midbass; 1 x 0.75in soft dome tweeter **ENCLOSURE:**Rear-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 70Hz-25kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 90dB POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED): 25W-200W DIMENSIONS: 252(h) x 162(w) x 162(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 1.8kg

### Sib Cub Evo (subwoofer)

**DRIVE UNITS:** 1 x 8.25in downfiring Polyflex woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Front-ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 35Hz-150Hz **ONBOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 200W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 305(h) x 208(w) x 299(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 8kg **CONNECTIONS:** LFE input; stereo phono input

speakers that you'll want to show off. Equally, positioning them at ear-height, to best aid their ceiling reflective driver, makes them less easy to find space for than most satellite speakers, where often an optimum position is forgone in favour of a neat installation. Ideally, you'll want to either wall-mount or standmount them (Focal sells its own Hip Evo stand).

Bare-wire speaker terminals across the range may have you tweaking your own cabling and – at least at first - cursing the fiddling required to lace up the L/R models, which feature both front and Atmos terminals. Once this has been done, of course, you're unlikely to have to do it again for a while.

While the sound performance of the Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 is generally bang on the money, other packages that have been through my room have thrown a light on its dry, analytical nature. In particular, Wharfedale's Diamond 11 HCP [see HCC #279] showed a warmer tone - and more rambunctious approach to LFE – than this more cool, calculated setup. So while I've consistently loved its detailed and lean sound signature, a little bit of unbridled aggression wouldn't go astray.

Another niggle here is that there's no obvious path to a 5.1.4 setup. You can buy additional Atmos speakers as a pair, but this actually gets you a 7.1.4 setup.

### Should I buv it?

I'd suggest the Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2 really has only one potential buyer – the home cinema fan seeking to replace a 5.1-channel sub/sat package (or soundbar system) with something a little more state-of-the-art. If that's you, you have to give it consideration, not least because adding standalone Atmos speakers to any existing sub/sat array is going to be a style compromise with its own placement issues to overcome.

What this well-performing package offers is a one-stop Atmos upgrade. The asking price isn't inconsiderable, but there's plenty here to admire

# **HCC VERDICT**



Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos

£1,100 - www.focal.com/uk

SAY: Focal's Sib Evo system is the ideal Atmos upgrade for sub/sat owners, offering an assured sound performance and a robust, classy construction.

- 1. Backing up the satellite speakers is the 8.25in Sib Cub Evo subwoofer
- 2. The L/R speakers pack a top-mounted 3in Atmos driver



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# Digital Copy

As a well-known UK home electronics retailer struggles to stay afloat, **Mark Craven** sings the praises of shopping with your eyes and ears rather than your keyboard and mouse

**IT'S NOT BEEN** a great year so far for the UK high street, with retailers and restaurants all posting dire financial warnings or falling into administration. And in the latter camp is Maplin, a business that I expect some of you are familiar with.

I was never a frequent shopper at Maplin, but clearly remember the last time I went to one of its stores. It was a Sunday, and I was in urgent need of a phono cable to hook up a subwoofer. Maplin is where I ended up.

For those who never experienced this UK technology retailer, it always felt to me like the middle ground between PC World and a specialist independent shop, where big-brand soundbars and headphones would clamour for shelf-space alongside Ethernet switches and home security widgets. When it was placed in administration at the end of February, it had over 200 stores.

The reasons given for Maplin's demise are varied, and not just, 'It's impossible to compete with Amazon'. Increased costs of imports, following the devaluation of the pound since June 2016, plus withdrawal of credit insurance, have been suggested as factors. Yet I'd also imagine the consumer shift away from bricks and mortar retail has taken its toll on a business with such a physical presence, selling products that, for the most part, don't demand a 'see-before-you-buy' mentality.

A visit to Maplin wasn't like going to the furniture department at John Lewis – it was like walking around a 3D recreation of a mail-order catalogue.

Maplin may yet rise again, as HMV has done, or it may go the same way as Blockbuster. Either way, its administration is another reminder that names that have long been part of the UK retail landscape can come a cropper.

# In the palm of your hand

Can the rest of the home electronics industry prove more resilient? I certainly hope so, as a future where all purchases are made online doesn't excite me much – and not just because any business model that asks the customer to accept a delivery 'between 9am and 5pm' is guaranteed to annoy.

When I buy things, I generally like to have a look at the thing I'm buying. There's a rough correlation between how expensive something is and how eager I am to see it, of course — I wouldn't buy a house before poking my head in the airing cupboard — but even cheap items I like to pick up and prod. It's why I still buy books in bookshops.

And when it comes to AV kit, I'm a huge believer in experiencing something first-hand. No speaker/amp combo sounds the same, and no TVs look the same, and everyone has a personal preference.

Get down to your local AV retailer (or even a not-so-local AV retailer) and you should be able to experience what you want to buy, ask questions and get sensible, informed answers.

What you do next is up to you. Rather than handing over your bank card, you might consider feigning indifference, heading home and trying to buy the same thing at a cheaper price from an online seller. I've been told by a number of AV specialists that this sort of thing happens from time to time. It's easy to understand. We're all keen to save money.

But – and it's a big but – if everyone did this, the next time you want to listen to a 5.1 speaker package, that shop and its fantastic demo room might not actually be there any more. We value our home cinema hardware. We should also value the retailers that put in the effort to sell it to us

Do you have a favourite AV retailer? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com Mark Craven does his food shopping online, as it's the only way to make sure he doesn't 'accidentally' buy a two-litre tub of clotted ice cream



# 76 OPINION



# Film Fanatic

**Anton van Beek** blames an entire decade for ruining the Oscars, and wishes the organisation behind these awards wasn't so afraid of reflecting mainstream passions

**THE AWARDS SEASON** is over for another year and, no matter how happy we were to see Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water* nab the Academy Award for Best Picture, it has shown yet again just how divorced these events have become from popular tastes.

Do I believe that *The Fate of the Furious* or *Wonder Woman* should have been in the running for the Best Picture Oscar? No. But since the number of nominations in that category pretty much doubled in 2009 (from five to ten, but now apparently settled at nine), **you'd think there'd be space for more films along the lines of Christopher Nolan's** *Dunkirk***; ones that manage to straddle that middle-ground between box office success and critical acclaim.** 

It hasn't always been this way. And putting together the list of discs that would be included in this issue's *Collecting... Best Picture Winners* feature [see p106] hammered that home.

Right up through the 1960s the Academy Awards established a history of celebrating populist films, handing over its Best Picture prize to An American in Paris, From Here to Eternity, Around the World in 80 Days, The Bridge on the River Kwai, Ben-Hur, West Side Story, Lawrence of Arabia and The Sound of Music. Meanwhile, films that found themselves nominated in the same category included Double Indemnity, The Bells of St. Mary's, The Treasure of Sierra Madre, High Noon, The Quiet Man, Shane, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, The Guns of Navarone, Cleopatra, How the West Was Won, Mary Poppins, Bonnie and Clyde and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.

Even during the 1970s, that revolutionary era where a new breed of tyro filmmakers subverted the traditional methods of production, we still witnessed films likes *Airport*, *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Deliverance*, *American* 

Graffiti, The Sting, The Exorcist, The Towering Inferno, Jaws, Rocky and Star Wars competing for the top prize. The odds of a genre blockbuster in the same vein as Jaws or Star Wars doing the same thing today is almost unthinkable.

# The decade of disaster

So where did it all go wrong? A look at films that were nominated and/or won the Best Picture Oscar over the decades throws up a simple answer: the 1980s happened.

For whatever reason, throughout the '80s the focus of the Best Picture gong shifted away from straight-up cinematic hits to 'prestige' pictures like Dangerous Liaisons (pictured) and Out of Africa, and intimate dramas such as On Golden Pond and Children of a Lesser God. Steven Spielberg's Raiders of the Lost Ark and E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial were the only exceptions to this dreary state of affairs, but they arrived at the very start of the decade (1981 and 1982, respectively), and they failed to grab the coveted prize anyway.

You can shock yourself viewing a list of all the movies nominated by the Academy during the 1980s. Was this organisation really trying to tell cinemagoers that *Fatal Attraction* was one of the five best films released in 1987? For your reference, that would be the same 1987 that gave us *Lethal Weapon*, *Predator*, *The Untouchables*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *RoboCop*.

Yes, more populist fare has been rewarded over the past couple of decades (such as *Gladiator* in 2000), but things could still be a lot better. It's time the Academy realised there's plenty to enjoy about blockbuster movies, and there's no shame in glorying in a film's box office success ■

Would you like to see more blockbusters nominated for Oscars? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com Anton van Beek is proud that of the 50 films nominated for the Best Picture Oscar during the 1980s, he only has eight among his disc collection



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# In The Mix

When it comes to HDR, **Jon Thompson** says you ain't seen nuthin' yet. But can the electronics industry afford to make its consumers wait around for much longer?

**ONE OF THE** technologies on display at CES this year which earned excited coverage in the press was Micro LED. Samsung had a prototype screen called 'The Wall'. It's perhaps more revolutionary than you might have thought – the first new display technology for around ten years.

The last major revolutionary launch was OLED, not by LG which is carrying the flag these days, but by Sony, which debuted an 11in screen back in 2007 – ten years before its bigscreen A1 successor.

Don't hate me, but I reckon we are seeing the end of life of OLED, as it can't deliver the performance needed for today's display technology HDR. It's never going to achieve the brightness of the HDR specification, and relies on tone mapping; you really need a 2,000-nit brightness, if not 4,000 nits, to do the format justice. Tone mapping is useful for projection, as you are never going to have 1,000 nits in a dark room. One reason being that it's dangerous for your eyes and will cause blinding headaches.

We're currently witnessing a kind of HDR-lite from OLED TVs. At the same time, as it stands virtually no content is captured in true HDR either. Instead, HDR is created in the grade, where the dynamic range of the photography is stretched. (Film-originated material gives a better result than digitally captured content due to film's better ability to capture highlights, looking good pushed to about 2,000 nits).

What we are going to see eventually on a wider scale is content capture at full dynamic range, and if you think you have seen HDR, it'll be time to think again. Such content appears very natural and not 'pushed' in the way a lot of UHD Blu-rays look. The first true HDR content will probably be sports, as it's a natural fit, and drama-based productions will change as momentum occurs and teams adapt to HDR workflows.

Back to Micro LED. This extreme brightness display tech is about to get some real traction, as it appears Apple is now developing it for use in its products. Like all displays, it's often easier to start by making a small version than a big one. I wouldn't be surprised if it's three-to-five years before we see largescreen displays using this technology available to buy, with a lot of prototypes shown in the meantime.

Really, though, we need them now. HDR can have that wow factor, which is why it's always been viewed as the 'next step' in home cinema. Micro LED, or Sony's CLEDIS system, should stop people giving up on HDR as a gimmick because they are not seeing what it can truly do.

At the moment it's poorly implemented (and confusing consumers via its different flavours) and not delivering what it says on the tin. **An HDR TV needs to be truly high dynamic range**, not a just-a-bit-brighter SDR display.

Creatives are so concerned that you can't achieve true HDR at home that a lot of films are not even really HDR despite the disc claiming they are. *Blade Runner 2049* is only mastered at 181 nits MaxCLL. Any display can achieve that without using tone mapping, which is something that scares creatives as each manufacturer does it differently. No filmmaker wants their movie messed up by bad picture processing if they can help it.

By the time true HDR displays start to arrive, I hope manufacturers won't have blown all the consumer goodwill. The only way to sell real high-brightness displays is to tell you that your previous display wasn't bright enough in the first place. Your current HDR TV may look great, but it really should look even greater

What has been your favourite HDR experience so far? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com When he's not in his screening room, Jon Thompson tweets about Hollywood gossip, movie-making and digital mastering at @johnnyfocal



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# Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current tech? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

# Can I improve my AV setup?

Hi. As a regular reader of *Home Cinema Choice*, I like reading about all the latest speaker systems and receivers and related AV equipment, even though most of the technical details go over my head.

My setup is based around the fact that I have to wear headphones. It's usually late at night when I get to watch films and not having a dedicated room means that for now speakers are not an option.

I have a basic setup. An Epson EH-TW6700 projector fires onto a wall painted with Smarter Surfaces projector screen paint.
I use a Sony BDP-S5200 Blu-ray player and Panasonic RP-HTX7 headphones. I plug the headphones into the back of the projector.

My question is: how do I go about improving this basic system, in particular the audio? Would buying better headphones be sufficient, or do I need to buy an external headphone amp or an AV receiver? I was looking at Blue Microphones' Sadie headphones, which feature a built-in amp. Would these alone be enough to beef up the sound? Should I be plugging my headphones into the Blu-ray player rather than the projector? Simon Daly

### Jon Thompson replies:

You're right, Simon: this is a basic setup – just a player and a projector! Yet while you could no doubt improve things visually (by considering a dedicated screen, for instance), boosting

audio should be your first port of call.

The only audio output your Blu-ray player has (in addition to HDMI) is a coaxial digital out. You want to find a way to use this, as plugging your headphones into your projector is not going to be good for the simple fact a projector will have a lot of high-frequency noise floating about from the power supply and the lamp.

A smallscale DAC/headphone amp with a coaxial input will let you take the audio straight from your player (remember to set its output to PCM) and onto your Panasonic cans. There are various budget options available, including one I found on Amazon called the SMSL M3 for £75. This is no doubt a cheap and cheerful solution, but perhaps worth a



The HD-DAC1 - a great building block

punt. If it's not to your liking you could always return it.

An alternative would be to look at something more expensive in the shape of Marantz's HD-DAC1 (£500). This gives you a very good digital preamplifier, with the inputs/outputs you need, and is a great building block for adding other sources. And any other BD player you may get with either an optical or coaxial output will also hook up fine.

A final option is to simply look at some new headphones (and I'd suggest the Marantz HD-DAC1 probably deserves an upgraded set), but I'd still be wary of feeding any straight from the audio output on your PJ.

# I've been in my loft...

Hello all. Having read articles about old technology, and at a loose end, I decided to dig out my VCR from the loft. I also found a copy of *Suspiria* to try it out. I connected the VCR to my TV and sat back to watch – I had forgotten how good the opening credits are. Even in stereo the rolling thunder sounded awesome! Needless to say the Blu-ray is on my to-buy list.

On another subject, reading Wendy Hiley's letter [HCC #284] makes me realise I must have married the wrong woman!

John Ellison, via email

Mark Craven replies: With vinyl resurgent in hi-fi circles, some have wondered whether VHS might also be due a re-appreciation. But while I understand the nostalgia value, let's be honest – it was a bit rubbish. Wasn't it?



# 3D BD deserves better

Well done Anton! Myself and a mate have been having bouts of mental hysteria over the lack of Dolby Atmos soundtracks on 3D Blu-rays in particular [see *Film Fanatic*, *HCC* #283].

We invest £5,000 on AV systems and then find we have to buy the 4K upgrades – not so much for the picture, but for the sound. I can't watch a film if there's no multidimensional soundtrack, I just lose interest, but I love the Atmos sound as it's so enthralling and powerful. It adds so much to the movies I love. You give them a roasting mate, we'll back you up. Wonderful mag – I've been reading for many years now. Is it really over 20? I'm getting old! Glenn

# 3D BD deserves better. II

I couldn't agree more with Steve Fyles [Feedback, HCC #284] about pairing 3D with Dolby Atmos, DTS:X or Auro-3D.

I remember reading about UHD and how great it was going to be in 3D. No need for active glasses! Passive will do because of the resolution hike! That was until the Blu-ray Disc Association decided it wasn't going to happen. Disappointment number one. Then they decided that 3D sound was only going onto the 'flat' discs. Disappointment number two.

These people are really out of touch with what film buffs want. They want us to buy both formats.

I have setups for both formats. If 3D is available I buy that over UHD. As Steve says there's more of a wow factor with 3D. 4K is okay if it's mastered right. Back-catalogue stuff is a bit naff. Frederick Elliott

Anton van Beek replies: Whatever the reason behind it (and I wouldn't be surprised if it was often being done to allow space for foreignlanguage soundtracks in order to create pan-European releases), the decision to drop existing Atmos or DTS:X soundtracks from 3D Blu-rays is one of my biggest frustrations as a home cinema fan. And it's nice to see – just as I presumed in my column – that many of you feel exactly the same way.

That there's no way for me to enjoy the native 3D photography of *Gravity* (the only way to experience the film as it was meant to be seen) paired with its native Dolby Atmos sound design, outside of popping the 3D disc in a Blu-ray deck attached to a screen, the 2D Atmos disc in another player hooked up to your speakers and pressing 'Play' on both at the same time, is utterly ridiculous.

Sadly, outside of an industry-wide rebirth of 3D spurred on by James Cameron and the eventual home entertainment release of his long-overdue *Avatar* sequel, I really don't see the situation changing either.

# Star Letter...

# Movies in your face!

Regards the article about IMAX and the section on premium film experiences [HCC #284], I reckon Cineworld's 4DX is one of the best ways to enjoy your action film of choice. As long as it's the second time you're watching it.

The main reason for this is that the 4DX experience can be a distraction from the film's narrative, especially if your seat is shaking, you're getting water sprayed in your face and the cinema suddenly smells like it's on fire.

For those that haven't yet strapped in to the 4DX rollercoaster, as well as a 3D screening, you get chairs that move in three dimensions, vibration plates and ticklers in the base and back of the seat, air jets behind your head and neck, water sprays above and in front (for those that don't like the idea of water, this can be turned off at the chair) and scent sprays. Then, depending on the theatre, you can also get fog, wind, rain and snow, as well as strobe lighting to enhance scenes that need, well, flashy lights.

Add all this together and you can see how it may be a distraction and take you away from the movie. However, for what you lose, you make up for in the physical and sensory experience.

I went to see *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in 4DX at Cineworld Sheffield.

When a Stormtrooper fired his blaster in the opening battle on Jakku, and a gush of air whooshed past my ear, I grinned in satisfaction. Then we had the seat rolling and pitching as we joined Poe in his X-Wing,

water misting in my face as he flew near the lake, and the kicks and rumbles of the whole seat as TIE-Fighters exploded.

Even the scent sprays (used on three or four

occasions) helped bring me into the action. You smell the burning metal of mangled ships, or the dampness of the Takodana forests when Rey first meets Kylo Ren.

So there are pros and cons to 4DX, and I'm sure the experience will differ depending on how well the motion/effects track is created by the developers. I also found that there were times where movement in the seat didn't bring anything to the party. But if you ask me would I go again, even with the extra cost (and risk of spilled popcorn), then I would have to say yes. Simon Young

Mark Craven replies: That seems both fun and annoying Simon. I've had some great D-Box experiences in the past, but found the pitch and roll a distraction at times. Air in my face and phantom smells sounds even more disruptive. But you've almost convinced me that I need to check it out.

Star letter-writer Simon grabs a copy of *The Shannara Chronicles: Season Two* on Blu-ray. Based on the bestselling series of fantasy books by Terry Brooks, this second season of this TV show finds The Four Lands in chaos once again when the evil Warlock Lord returns from the dead. *The Shannara Chronicles: Season Two* is available to own on DVD and Blu-ray from April 30, courtesy of Studiocanal



Mark Craven replies: Just to add to Anton's defence of all things 3D, I should counter your view that back-catalogue 4K discs don't impress, Frederick. Sure, there have been some poor-quality legacy releases (*Terminator 2: Judgement Day* being a good example), but there have also been poor-

quality releases of modern movies (such as *Warcraft*).

In fact, there are some back-catalogue releases that I would rank as among the best the format has to offer, including *Bridge on the River Kwai*, which looks sumptuous for a movie of such vintage, and *Crouching Tiger*,

Hidden Dragon. Of course, both these titles appear clearly derived from their film origins, with noticeable grain, and I concede that if I was to show an AV newbie a 4K HDR disc to highlight the benefits of the format, I would no doubt opt for a modern, clean-looking title such as Passengers or Dunkirk.

# Should I stick with JVC?

Not sure if you remember me. You featured my cinema room in your magazine a few years ago – we live out in Italy and have a JVC X70 PJ, amongst other bits.

We're going to be moving house later this year so I'll be kitting out a new, dedicated room and I wonder if you could advise me. We have the JVC projector which I think is a six-year-old model now. Since then JVC has released the X75, X700, X750, X7000, X7500 and the current X7900. My question is, is it worth upgrading?

Based on your reviews, the current models are starting to look good with HDR material, although at a guess it might be a year or two before they really nail it. Mine has a claimed brightness of 1,300 Lumens whereas the X7900 is pumping out a claimed 1,900.

Ours still looks wonderful with Blu-ray but the newer ones presumably look even more wonderful.

Plus there are now some 4K models available from Sony, Optoma and others. You'll know that the JVC has great black levels; would we miss that if we went for an Optoma or Sony? Would JVC's DLA-X5900 be better than ours or should I stick with a 7XXX variant?

Cheers, and thanks for a brilliant magazine.

Marcus

**John Archer replies:** It is definitely worth upgrading now that 4K and HDR are an established and brilliant part of the AV world.

If money is no object, Sony's laser-based VW760ES is the best home cinema 4K/HDR projector without spending stratospheric amounts of money. But this still costs £15,000.

As a more affordable option, JVC's DLA-X5900 is outstanding. For the first time JVC has combined its traditional black level prowess with an effective HDR performance, while its e-Shift technology does a better job than previous iterations of delivering a 4K-esque image despite not boasting a native 4K resolution.

Although we haven't yet tested the X7900, its superior specifications suggest it will be worth the extra over the excellent X5900. Especially with HDR playback.

While some of the new breed of affordable DLP projectors are exceptional value, you'll likely find their contrast unsatisfactory given your JVC history.

Cue Sony's VPL-VW360ES. While its black levels aren't up to the standards of JVC, they're perfectly respectable. Sony is also



clever about how it adjusts HDR for a projection environment, and most importantly of all, it delivers true 4K pictures that look notably sharper and cleaner than JVC's e-Shift 4K images.

My gut feeling is that you will feel more all-round satisfied with one of the JVC models. But do at least demo the X7900/X5900 alongside a Sony VW360ES if you can.

# Is speed of the essence?

I was thrilled to see my letter published in HCC #284 but even more fascinated at Keith's letter in the same issue, which not only gave an opposite and challenging view but considerable food for thought — his Star Letter was thoroughly deserved!

There were several moments after reading Keith's letter where I seriously thought: would there be a time when I would consider discarding my AVR and multichannel speaker package for a soundbar solution? In fact Keith gave me the most compelling case to consider a soundbar ever. Never say never, as the saying goes. But for now I'm going to stand by my multichannel setup.

However, what puzzled me most was Keith's statement about how quick it is to get his soundbar ready to rock compared to the slowness of his Sony AVR. I find that by far the most time-consuming part of switching on my kit (and I confess I use a Harmony remote with a pre-programmed activity) is probably waiting for the BD player to boot and load a disc. (Although my Panasonic DMP-UB700 is much faster than my DMP-BD10A ever was. Do you recall those Profile 1.0 days? My wife used to point out how much quicker it would be to just watch a DVD...).

If I am watching a movie on Netflix or Amazon Prime (through my 4K Fire TV) then of course things are a little quicker, and Keith also appears to mostly stream movies.

So in the interests of science or nonsense (I forget which), I've clocked my setup at 31 seconds from first (Harmony) button press to movie-ready (for Blu-ray), although this is not including 'disc load time' because firstly, the performance of the disc player is not pertinent here, but mostly because it takes me some time to get out of my armchair, remove the cellophane from the Blu-ray, find my glasses and insert the right disc because otherwise I'll just end up watching the 'Special Features' or the DVD version that came with it.

However, I did manage to clock a blistering 23 seconds for the 4K Fire TV. I say blistering but I have no idea what constitutes blistering, although I can state that in both cases my Denon AVR was ready to rumble after 10.8 seconds! Is that good?

I already know I've shot myself in the foot as I can guarantee all the soundbar owners with stopwatches have now had a go and are gleefully punching the air, having shaved off many vital seconds. But is this really a factor? I think soundbars have a great many pros (as well as cons) that would sway people to either avoid a multichannel setup completely or trade up for one, but is the time taken to switch on your kit really one of them? How else will you make sure you have had enough time to get your drinks, snacks and nibbles ready?

# Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at **letters@homecinemachoice.com** Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.

# WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance to win

# Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: The Complete Series

Get ready for a blast from the past as the full 33-episode run of this classic sci-fi TV series explodes onto Blu-ray. Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: The Complete Series is out now, courtesy of Fabulous Films Ltd./ Fremantle Media Enterprises and we've got two Blu-ray boxsets to give away!

# **Ouestion:**

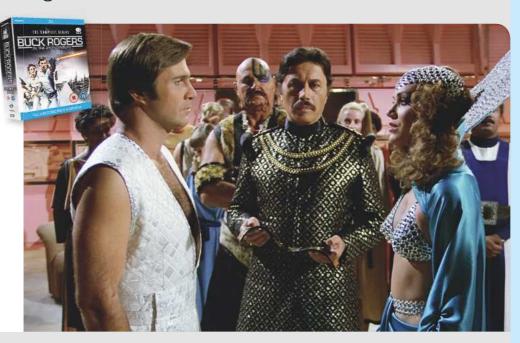
Which actress starred as Colonel Wilma Deering in the series?

# **Answer:**

A) Pamela Hensley B) Erin Gray

C) Jamie Lee Curtis

Email your answer with 'Buck Rogers' as the subject heading — and don't forget to include your postal address!





*Moon* is available now, with *Nightmares* following on April 23 – and we've got three pairs of the two Blu-rays up for grabs!

# **Question:**

Which of the following didn't direct some of *Amazon Women on the Moon*?

# **Answer:**

A) John Landis B) Steven Spielberg
C) Joe Dante

Email your answer with 'Amazon Women' as the subject heading — and don't forget to include your postal address!



# And the unit

# Rawhead Rex

An ancient demon terrorises the Irish countryside in this unforgettable '80s monster movie, which arrives on Blu-ray on May 14, courtesy of Arrow Video. In addition

to a new 4K restoration of the film, the Blu-ray is also packed with bonus goodies – and to celebrate the release we've got five Rawhead Rex Blu-rays to be won!

# **Question:**

Rawhead Rex is adapted from a short story by which famous horror author?

### **Answer:**

A) Stephen King B) Clive Barker

C) Shaun Hutson

Email your answer with 'Rawhead Rex' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



# MOLLYS GAME

# Molly's Game

The operator of an exclusive high-stakes poker empire finds herself targeted by the FBI in this remarkable true story. *Molly's Game* is available to own on Digital

Download from May 4, followed by DVD and Blu-ray on May 14, courtesy of Entertainment One Ltd. To mark the release we have five Blu-rays to give away!

# **Question:**

*Molly's Game* marked the directorial debut of which award-winning screenwriter?

# Answer:

A) William Goldman B) Diablo Cody

C) Aaron Sorkin

Email your answer with 'Molly's Game' as the subject heading — and don't forget to include your postal address!

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# **Certified: AV-Holic!**

HCC reader Mark got some family help to build this outdoor movie theatre. Now he's dazzling friends with its 4K visuals, 3D audio and Alexa-powered smart control



# Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame — introduce yourself!

My name is Mark Burton, I'm a Director for a local recruitment agency.

# How long have you been into home cinema?

I purchased my first plasma screen in 2003 – a 42in Fujitsu – and since then I have been hooked! I bought my first projector the following year, and had my first dedicated cinema room about 10 years later.

Upon moving to a new house in 2016, one of my prerequisites when finding a suitable home was somewhere that would give me the ability to have a proper cinema room, taking things to another level. However, things panned out slightly differently when moving in. The garage I had planned on converting wasn't suitable, so, with the help of my dad, I decided on building a completely new structure outside.

# What's in your AV setup?

Things have moved quickly since building the cinema in the Summer of 2017. Only last

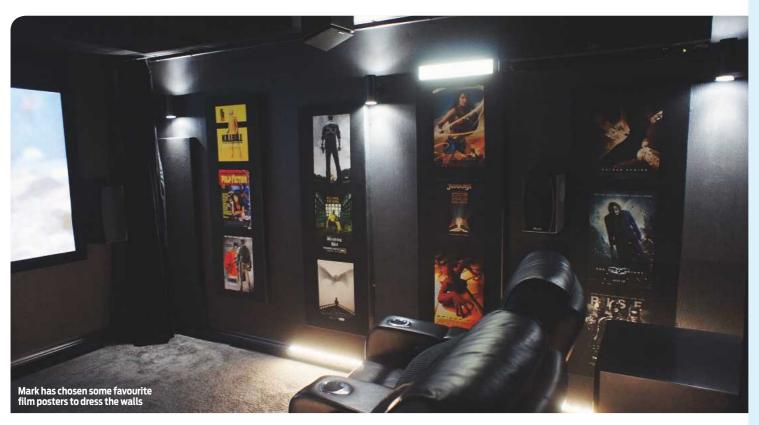


Easter the building didn't even exist. A lot of research and hard work and it's now totally finished.

Quite proud to know that, with the help of my dad, we've built the whole building

ourselves — not just the external structure, but also the acoustically transparent black velvet curtains, 19 acoustic panels, AV unit and projector screen.

My current list of equipment for vision is a JVC DLA-X7900 projector, Oppo UDP-203 UHD player, Radiance Lumagen 4440 scaler,





Sky+HD, Roku Streaming Stick+ and Xbox One X, with a DIY variable masking screen (16:9 and CinemaScope).

For sound I have a full 7.1.4 XTZ Cinema Series Dolby Atmos speaker setup with Arendal Sub 3, Denon AVR-X7200 AVR and an IOTA seven-channel power amp.

Finishing things off for comfort are a Logitech Harmony Remote with Alexa, Philips Hue lighting, Mitsubishi Zen air-conditioning unit and Premiere three-seater cinema seating from Drinkstuff.

# What was the last thing you added to your system?

This seems to change on a weekly basis! Only recently I've replaced an Epson EH-TW9300 projector with the JVC model, and the Arendal subwoofer replaced a pair of outgoing Monolith subs from BK Electronics.



With the ground preparation done, our AV-Holic (and his dad) could get to work constructing the cinema's timber frame



Building work for the 5m x 4m (approx) theatre took place last Summer, meaning less chance of frustrating rain delays



Walls and ceiling insulated, and cabling installed for the room's eventual 7.1.4 speaker array and smart lighting

# Are you thinking of upgrading anything else?

I'd like to say no, not at the moment, but then again only three months ago I had no intention of changing projector or changing subwoofer. I'm now about to get a second Arendal Subwoofer 3.

# What's your favourite bit of kit and why?

That's a really difficult question to answer. I'm not sure I have a favourite as such, although my projector and speakers are very special. For my application, I think I will struggle to improve on performance without seriously breaking the bank. If I was to choose one thing that adds performance to my room, I think it would actually be my acoustic panels. Since adding them, the soundstage in my room has massively improved. This is an area that I feel a lot of people disregard, although it is probably the most important part of the room.

# Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix/Amazon/Sky etc?

Yes, I have Amazon Prime and Netflix membership. I use these through the Roku in my cinema room and direct through my Sony 65in AIE OLED in my living room.

# How often do you settle down for movie night?

I try to use my room at least two or three times a week. This is usually for films, but I will also watch football in there as well.

# What movies/discs do you use to show off your system?

The recent release of *Interstellar* on Ultra HD Blu-ray is absolutely incredible. The scene where Cooper enters the black hole is definitely my new go-to scene. When showing people this, the reaction is always the same: they always seem to forget they are watching a film and actually feel like they are in the spaceship with Coop. The surround mix and bass on it is fantastic.



You can feel the pressure build up in my room as the scene progresses.

Other go-to discs include *The Dark Knight* (Ultra HD Blu-ray), *Oblivion* and, for Dolby Atmos purposes, *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

# And what are your Top 5 favourite flicks?

Five isn't many to choose from, although *Aliens* and *Terminator 2* will always make it. Other noteworthy favourites in no particular order include *The Dark Knight Trilogy* (I know, not one film), *Heat*, *Predator*, *Die Hard* and *The Silence of the Lambs*.



# What do friends and family think of the cinema room?

They all love it! My girls (10 and 11) think it's amazing and always want to show it off to their friends, and I'm sure my 10-month-old boy will be my movie buddy when he gets older!

Anyone who comes to have a demo is awestruck at the quality of the sound, picture and the whole experience. They all say they will now feel that the local multiplex will be a step backwards. Unfortunately, I don't think pictures will ever do a dedicated room justice. Until you experience one, they are very difficult to explain how good they are!



# Share your cinema system in the mag!

# If you want to be in HCC, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

- 1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing we will make them print-ready.

  2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we
- 3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch
- movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.
- **4.** Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.
- **5.** Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself! **6.** Show us more. Got pictures of your room
- b. Snow us more. Got pictures of your roor before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

# Now what?

Email your images to

**letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the relevant questions above – then we'll be in touch!

can print them.







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CEDIA MEMBER

# PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** THE SHAPE OF WATER Award-winning fantasy makes a splash THREE BILLBOARDS OUTSIDE EBBING, MISSOURI Acclaimed drama packs a punch on Ultra HD Blu-ray JUMANJI: WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE Fun and games in this familyfriendly sequel/reboot JUSTICE LEAGUE Are these 4K heroes in a league of their own? & MORE!





Guillermo del Toro's Oscar-winning fantasy deserves to be a monster hit on UHD Blu-ray





# HCC VERDICT

- Twentieth Century Fox
- UHD Blu-ray & Region A BD
- £30 (US Import)

This 4K encode's use of HDR and wide colour is perfectly suited to del Toro's painterly vision.

Movie: Picture: Audio:

# → THE SHAPE OF WATER

Try summarising Guillermo del Toro's latest movie to someone and it'll sound like the very worst kind of student film. A romantic fairy tale set in an Art Deco world, about misfits falling in love, where one of the misfits is an actual monster who looks like he's walked straight off the set of The Creature from the Black Lagoon? It ain't Fast and Furious, certainly.

Yet so beautifully written and sensuously filmed is The Shape of Water that any resistance to its apparent tweeness lasts for all of five minutes. This is cinema at its enchanting best, and as such it deserves the many awards that have been lavished on both the film itself and its writer-director.

Picture: Despite only getting a 2K cinema release from a predominantly 3.4K shoot, The Shape of Water's 4K transfer does a much more effective job of delivering its beautiful lighting, sets and imagery than the accompanying 1080p Blu-ray.

There's noticeably more detail in the beautifully crafted costumes and wonderfully detailed sets, as well as the remarkably realised skin of the film's 'creature'. There's precious little CGI in play here, and it shows.

There's also a more defined sense of space in the film's whimsical locations, and these image enhancements help you forge a more intimate relationship with del Toro's vision.

The Ultra HD Blu-ray's biggest treat, though, is the gorgeous effect its wider colour and light ranges have on the film's fantastical world. Every frame looks

more dynamic and rich, enhancing the dream-like atmosphere and making the film's world an even more irresistible – if occasionally icky – place to be. Audio: Accompanying The Shape of Water's impressive visuals is a DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundmix. This is a little disappointing; we could imagine an Atmos or DTS:X track really enhancing the sense of height and space in the film's laboratory locations, or making Alexandre Desplat's score even more hypnotic.

To be fair, though, even in this 5.1 guise the score meanders artfully around every channel, dialogue is always impressively contextualised, and there's a rich, uncompressed, clean feel to everything. **Extras:** All *The Shape of Water*'s extras are found on the (Region A-locked ) Full HD Blu-ray that is packed alongside this 4K US import – and while it doesn't sport the sort of heavyweight assortment of goodies we've come to expect from previous Blu-ray releases of Guillermo del Toro's films (the major surprise being the lack of a commentary track), there's still some good stuff here to get stuck into.

The highlights kick off with a half-hour Making of... documentary covering all the main aspects of the film's creation, from production design to score and the development of the creature. There are also short featurettes detailing the filming of two key scenes; an interview with artist James Jean (who created much of the film's gorgeous concept art); and a fascinating 'masterclass' with a theatre full of film students where del Toro and other crew members discuss making a monster movie.

# The Snowman

Universal Pictures → All-region BD



It was always likely that Hollywood would try to bring one of Jo Nesbø's bestselling crime novels to the screen, but who

would have thought it would make as big of a hash of it as this? Rushed into production (director Tomas Alfredson claims he didn't have the time to shoot around 15 per cent of the screenplay), the film is an incomprehensible mess of abandoned subplots that fails to realise the cinematic potential of Nesbø's novel. This BD sports a suitably cool and crisp Full HD encode, while the DTS-HD MA 7.1 mix is pleasingly immersive. Extras are limited to five short promo featurettes.

# **Ferdinand**

Twentieth Century Fox → Region B BD



The classic children's book The Story of Ferdinand (about a bull who would rather smell flowers than compete

in bullfights) gets a fairly charmless CGanimated update courtesy of the studio responsible for the *Ice Age* films. While the 'toon itself is unlikely to excite you, this Blu-ray should hold your attention with its bright, colourful and perfectly rendered 2.40:1-framed Full HD encode. The disc's DTS-HD MA 5.1 track is no slouch either, delivering plenty of action across the soundstage. Bonus goodies are plentiful, although they're almost entirely aimed at little kids.



# Pitch Perfect 3

Universal Pictures → All-region BD



Struggling to adjust to life outside college the Barden Bellas reunite for one last musical tour in this final instalment of the comedy series. It's not as sharp as

the original, but *Pitch Perfect 3* does at least improve on its immediate predecessor and finds a few new beats to add to the formula. The undoubted highlight of this BD release is an effortlessly fluid and wide-ranging DTS:X soundtrack that takes the a capella musical numbers to new heights; the AVC 1.85:1 Full HD encode is also richly detailed and clean. A pair of chat-tracks head up a sizeable set of extras.





\*\*\*

# A sign of the times for HDR

Martin McDonagh's unforgettable drama makes quite an impression in 4K

# → Three Billboards Outside EBBING, MISSOURI

Writer/director Martin McDonagh's drama about a mother seeking justice following the murder of her daughter has been pretty omnipresent on the recent awards circuit – and its acclaim is deserved. Despite being a little overtly theatrical at times, it remains a powerful, brilliantly-acted smalltown America drama that holds up well to repeat viewings. Picture: Three Billboards... was shot at 2.8K, and only received a 2K digital intermediate for cinematic release. Hardly surprising, then, that the image on this 4K Blu-ray isn't the sharpest around, lacking the detail and crispness of the best-looking releases.

> That said, the picture does improve on the 1080p transfer. The lush landscapes look slightly more defined and three-dimensional, while close-ups reveal more refinement in the actors' care-worn faces.

The HDR10 upgrade also means that sunny exteriors appear naturally bright and vivid, while artificial light sources have a more life-like intensity.

The red hue of the titular billboards is far more punchy, yet the enhanced colour grading of the 4K Blu-ray also makes skin tones look more authentic.

There are a couple of issues. First, a few sequences – such as the opening one in the mist – appear slightly noisier than they do on the Blu-ray. Second, some exterior shots are infiltrated by



a mild vellow undertone. Overall, though, the 4K picture justifies the disc's extra cost.

Audio: Three Billboards... only gets a DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix on both its 4K and 1080p discs. Even so, we didn't find the movie lacking from an audio perspective; it's hardly an action blockbuster, after all. What you do get sounds clean and open; it's alive with ambient details, and revels in Carter Burwell's haunting score.

**Extras:** For a relatively low-budget release, *Three* Billboards... gets a solid set of extra features. Pick of the pack is a 30-minute Making of... documentary that includes lots of behind-the-scenes footage and an excellent breakdown of the film's pivotal scene. There are also five deleted scenes.

Also, be sure to set half-an-hour aside for Six Shooter - a darkly comic (and Oscar-winning) 2004 short film by McDonagh that redefines the idea of somebody having a bad day.





Frances McDormand's Mildred takes the law into her own hands

# HCC VERDICT

Three Billboards Outside

- Twentieth Century Fox UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD
- £30 (US Import)

WE SAY: This brilliantly acted drama enjoys a respectable 4K showing.

Movie: Picture. Audio: Extras:





# A new hope for AV?

It's all change in a galaxy far, far away as Disney dips its toes into Dolby Vision HDR

# → STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI

The Force Awakens, with its familiar narrative beats and cast of returning favourites, was undoubtedly the ideal first movie for Disney as it sought to reignite fan passion in all things Star Wars. Follow-up flick The Last Jedi successfully takes the series into something of a new direction. As it surely had to.

Plot-wise, the movie (written and directed by Rian 'Looper' Johnson), picks up where Force Awakens left off, with Rey (Daisy Ridley), meeting up with Jedi veteran Luke Skywalker at his remote island hideaway. Meanwhile, Poe (Oscar Isaac) and Finn (John Boyega) are embedded with the Resistance fleet as it flees from First Order ships and new series baddies Kylo Ren and General Snoke. Johnson's script then balances the action between Rey's Jedi training and the Resistance escape, before pulling plot-lines together for the expected climax. Actually, two climaxes.

You'd have to have been living in a swamp on Dagobah to not know that *The Last Jedi* upset some *Star Wars* aficionados when it hit cinemas last December. The main gripes didn't solely concern the overall narrative, however; also Johnson's approach to the material. This is a flick unafraid to lay on moments of broad humour, and unafraid to take its characters and themes in unexpected directions. While *The Force Awakens* was built upon nostalgia, *The Last Jedi* jettisons a lot of the past.

To be honest, we can't see what all the fuss was about. Johnson and Disney have crafted a thoughtful, spectacle-laden blockbuster that drives the saga story forward, carefully homages the past (check out Rey and Kylo Ren's *Return of the Jedi*esque elevator ride) and fleshes out its trio of young leads. It also gives Mark Hamill, as Skywalker, a real chance to shine.

**Picture:** Not content with making *The Last Jedi* the first *Star Wars* film on 4K Blu-ray, Disney has delivered it in Dolby Vision and HDR10 versions. Both look much better than the HD Blu-ray — although they're not quite consistent enough to qualify as reference-grade.

For instance, while many close-up shots are markedly crisper and more detailed than on the HD Blu-ray, some largescale shots look little if any sharper – despite the transfer being derived from a native 4K digital intermediate. This inconsistency, together with some slight variance in the amount of grain in the image, is likely not helped by the film's special effects presumably not being rendered in native 4K. Or by the use during filming of a mixture of 35mm, 65mm and digital cameras.

For most of the time, though, *The Last Jedi* on 4K Blu-ray gives you the most detailed look at the *Star* 





# **Arcade Action**

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



Since its inception almost a decadeand-a-half ago, the *Far Cry* franchise has been acclaimed for innovation and

pushing the boundaries of the first-person-shooter genre. Far Cry 5 does neither. It is, however, an excellent game and a stunningly beautiful one to boot.

If you were a big fan of Far Cry 4 you will find much here that is familiar and, even, directly lifted from that previous title. But while this fifth instalment brings very few new tricks to the table, it gives players an enormous open-world environment to roam and hundreds of missions and side quests to undertake. It is a huge game and no mistake.

This time the action has switched to the United States and a corner of Montana that is terrorised by a local religious cult: Project at Eden's Gate. This cult is run by a malevolent leader in Joseph Seed who, along with several family members, has kidnapped the local populace, taken their lands and rules with a cruel fist.

It's therefore a far darker setup than Far Cry 4, although there are lighter tones in some of the side missions to brighten the mood at times. As with the last few Far Cry games (and most Ubisoft open-world games, full-stop) you must complete missions and take outposts to expose the map. You also need to take on specific boss battles and defeat each member of the Seed brood in order to get to Joseph himself.

There's also the cornucopia of collectables and side tasks that mean little to the main narrative but extend your playtime dramatically. Indeed, should you decide to take on everything the game has to offer, you could well be playing for weeks on end. And that's no bad thing.

Visually, Far Cry 5 is spectacular. The rendered landscapes of Montana are rich in detail and the use of HDR is perfect. The green grass is vivid, blue skies also, and corn fields are bursting with yellows and browns. Explosions and fire effects are even more brilliant in tone and a decent TV will make them sing.

If you have an Xbox One X you get the biggest treat. The game runs at a full native 4K resolution (3,840 x 2,160) and is incredibly crisp. The PS4 Pro maxes at 2,880 x 1,620, which is better than the standard PS4, but all versions still look great. You won't be disappointed no matter the format.



# **Britannia: Season 1**

Sony Pictures → Region B BD



If you're the sort of person who prefers a more serious TV historical drama then you should steer clear of this recent Sky production. Set during the Roman invasion of Britain, the

series serves up a heady mix of violence and mysticism that is more indebted to *Game of Thrones* than *I, Claudius*. However, if you buy in to the show's comic book-esque brand of lunacy then there's plenty to enjoy. Sharp, colourful 1.78:11080p visuals partnered with pleasingly dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics help make it easy to savour on Blu-ray.



# **Outlander: Season Three**

Sony Pictures → All-region BD



Following the same pattern as its second season, this latest run of 13 episodes is split between two arcs – the first focusing on reuniting time-displaced lovers Claire and Jamie, the second on

sending them on a fresh adventure. This time around, though, it's a bit more unbalanced, stretching the former arc too far and not giving the latter arc the space it really needs; at least the chemistry between the leads is as strong as ever and helps paper over these issues. Also distracting your attention somewhat is the typically excellent AV performance and generous selection of extras this Blu-ray release rustles up.



# Amazon Women on the Moon

101 Films → Region B BD & R2 DVD £20



Based around flicking between TV channels late at night, this 1987 sketch movie may be a pretty inconsistent affair, but when the parodies hit their targets (as in Carl Gottlieb's

Son of the Invisible Man, John Landis's Blacks Without Soul and Joe Dante's Bulls\*\*t or Not?) the results are truly side-splitting. Despite Universal's iffy track record with DNR application on its back-catalogue HD masters, the one licensed to 101 Films for this release retains a film-like appearance throughout. Fun extras include a chat-track, two interviews and six cut skits.





Playing games with nostalgia

This enjoyable videogame-era franchise reboot delivers a flawless 1080p encode on Blu-ray

# → Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle

During detention, four high school teenagers — nerdy Spencer (Alex Wolff), self-centred Bethany (Madison Iseman), football jock 'Fridge' (Ser'Darius Blain) and loner Martha (Morgan Turner) — find a vintage video game console. Within moments of turning it on they are sucked into the *Jumanji* game world, appearing in the forms of the avatars they had chose to play as.

Spencer is now the muscular explorer Dr. Smolder Bravestone (Dwayne Johnson), Bethany the cartographer Professor Sheldon 'Shelly' Oberon (Jack Black), 'Fridge' the diminutive zoologist Franklin 'Mouse' Finbar (Kevin Hart) and Martha the lethal Ruby Roundhouse (Karen Gillan). Only by completing the game and recovering the mystical Jaguar's Eye jewel from the evil Professor Van Pelt (Bobby Cannavale) can they hope to return to the real world.

Cleverly updating the board game concept from the original 1995 Robin Williams film is only one of the many treats this canny sequel-reboot has in store for modern audiences. From the good-natured fun it has with its archetypal characters to the over-the-top action scenes, it captures the spirit of 1980s family films like *The Goonies –* albeit with a more self-reflexive sense of humour (and much less screaming).

Add in some really great gags and enjoyable performances and it's easy to see why strong wordof-mouth propelled Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle to become one of the biggest box office smashes of the past 12 months. A feat we have no doubt it will soon repeat with this home entertainment release... **Picture:** Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle arrives on Blu-ray with a reference-quality AVC 2.40:1-framed 1080p encode. Shot on location in Hawaii, the movie is bursting with vibrant colours, while the natural brightness only serves to show off the flawless definition and sharpness of the imagery. Black levels are also perfectly presented, ensuring that even darker locations such as the Bazaar and the tunnels under it (Chapters 7 and 8) are perfectly portrayed and never lose any clarity.

Audio: From motorbike mayhem to rampaging rhinos, the disc's DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is an extremely active affair. The soundscape frequently envelops with dynamic surround elements and meaty bass. As good as this is, however, we imagine the original Dolby Atmos incarnation would be even more immersive — but yet again Sony has decided to only make this available to buyers of its 4K disc.

**Extras:** Apart from losing out on the Atmos mix, the other disappointing aspect of this Blu-ray is the collection of extras. All you get are a gag reel; five run-of-the-mill *Making of...* featurettes; and a spoof Jack Black music video.



From geek to hunk at the push of a button – aren't videogames great?



# **HCC VERDICT**

### Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle

Sony Pictures - All-region BD

WESAY: A sparkling hi-def outing for this fun film – although the lack of Atmos audio disappoints.

Movie:
Picture:
Audio:
Extras:





# Not as amazing as the original

Feature film re-edit struggles to wow, despite some supposed AV enhancements

# → EARTH: ONE AMAZING DAY

This 90-minute nature film from the BBC Earth team responsible for Planet Earth II plays very much like an Americanised excuse (it's narrated by Robert Redford and backed by a near-incessant easylistening music track) for repurposing lots of footage from that acclaimed documentary series.

Restructuring the material around a day in the life of our planet opens the door to some new insights, though, and watching beautiful scenery and wildlife in 4K HDR never grows old. Meanwhile, the relatively short running time and easier narrative makes it a lot more child-friendly than the original Beeb show.

**Picture:** Curiously, we weren't as consistently blown away by Earth: One Amazing Day's 4K HDR picture quality as we were by that of Planet Earth II.

Close-ups of animals still reveal far more fur and feather detail than you get on the 1080p Blu-ray, and HDR makes bright locations look more lifelike. But wider shots tend to look slightly soft/compressed, and the disc's HDR10 pass appears less controlled.

This 4K Blu-ray is still the optimum way to watch the film, though. This is especially true if you can handle the disc's Dolby Vision pass, which delivers more refined colours in dark areas and, in doing so, slightly enhances the overall sense of detail. **Audio:** Earth: One Amazing Day on Ultra HD Blu-ray features a Dolby Atmos soundtrack, as opposed to the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes that accompanied Planet Earth II on the format, and it's great to hear this deliver some genuine height effects. For instance, during underwater sequences water laps above you as well as behind and to the side.



Even better, the soundmix is precise enough to place specific animal noises at the right height and position in front of you.

It also tries harder than Planet Earth II's audio to use ambient and creature sounds to create a sense of living, breathing, three-dimensional spaces. Unfortunately, these sometimes feel rather forced - as do some obvious Foley-created effects.

The score, meanwhile, is liberally mixed around the Atmos channels, but is overused and feels cloyingly dated. As a result, it's more likely to distract you than enhance your immersion.

**Extras:** All of Earth: One Amazing Day's HD extras are also found on the 4K Blu-ray. They comprise a 15-minute behind-the-scenes featurette, plus short vignettes about the filming of the Narwhal, fighting giraffe, White-Headed Langur, penguin and sloth sequences. Worth a watch, but there's nothing really substantial here.





Is this the ultimate creature feature?

# HCC VERDICT

BBC Worldwide UHD Blu-ray & Region B BD - £30

WE SAY: A more child-friendly cut of Planet Earth II with, curiously, less impressive 4K picture quality.

Movie: Picture: Audio: Extras: OVERALL: 🖈 🖈 🖈

# **Heimat: Limited Edition Boxset**

Second Sight → Region B BD



Subtitled 'A Chronicle of Germany', Edgar Reitz's 15-hour TV drama follows the life of a family from a small

German village between 1919 and 1982. Restored from the original negative and presented in its cinema version (which joins pairs of shorter episodes together to make feature-length instalments), Heimat looks sensational on Blu-ray; the 1.66:11080i encodes cope equally well with the series' black-and-white and colour visuals. A disc of extras includes a look at the restoration process and Reitz's 'Hunsrüch Villages...' documentary.



# The Awful Truth

The Criterion Collection → Region B BD



The Criterion Collection has recently become something of a haven for fans of Cary Grant's screwball comedies.

Directed by Leo McCarey, this 1938 film is another treat for fans, with Grant and co-star Irene Dunne on sparkling form as the warring husband and wife going through a divorce. While bonus features aren't all that extensive (just a pair of informative video essays, a 1978 audio interview with Dunne and a 1939 radio adaptation), the 4K restoration of the film itself is a joy to behold, revealing excellent stability, authentic black levels and well-resolved film grain.



# Otley

Indicator → All-region BD



This 1968 comic spy thriller from writing duo Ian Le Frenais and Dick Clement finds Tom Courtenay's feckless,

couch-surfing layabout Gerald Arthur Otley somehow getting caught up in a conflict between two espionage agencies, both of which believe he knows far more than he's letting on. This off-kilter comedy comes to Blu-ray with an impressive 1.85:1 encode that only really takes a turn for the worse during a sequence in a Tube station (and that is entirely down to the different film stock that was required). Once again Indicator offers up a terrific array of extras, including a chat-track and interviews.



# **Breathless**

Second Sight → Region B BD £20



Jim McBride's 1983 US remake of Jean-Luc Godard's French New Wave classic may not be held in the same sort

of critical regard as the original, but taken on its own terms it's an enjoyable piece of pop cinema that is arguably a lot more fun to watch. Although the pleasingly colour-saturated 1.85:1 encode featured on this UK Blu-ray looks very reminiscent of the 2015 US release, Second Sight has improved on Shout! Factory's essentially barebones Region A platter by including an interview with actress Valérie Kaprisky and an impassioned defence of the film from critic Mark Kermode.

























Not doing its heroes justice

After the highs of Wonder Woman, this team-up flick brings the DCEU crashing back to Earth

# → Justice League

In the wake of Superman's death, the alien warlord Steppenwolf spies an opportunity to attack our world. Realising they have no chance of stop him by themselves, Batman and Wonder Woman recruit a trio of new metahumans to help...

When Wonder Woman hit the bigscreen last year it looked like the DC Extended Universe had taken a turn for the better. Sadly, any expectations that Justice League would continue this course correction are quickly dashed. What should be the pinnacle of DC's cinematic achievements to date instead comes across as a complete mess.

The fact that credited director Zack Snyder left the film due to a family bereavement, only to be replaced by Joss Whedon (who rewrote chunks of the script and oversaw reshoots), means that it's not especially surprising that *Justice League* is tonally inconsistent. What is more of a shock is how half-finished the film looks. From the lacklustre VFX to the uneven performances, it feels like an edit suite salvage job that has been rush-released into cinemas before it was ready. Which is definitely not what you hope for from a blockbuster title with an apparent \$300m budget.

**Picture:** Justice League was shot on various media at multiple resolutions, with Warner Bros ultimately creating a 2K-resolution cinematic version. This is, presumably, the source of this 4K Blu-ray image.

Sharpness and detail are sometimes so high, though, that it's hard to believe you're not looking at





# HCC VERDICT

Justice League

Movie:

→ Warner Bros. → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £35

WESAY: Yet another cinematic misstep for DC's superheroes, but at least it looks pretty in 4K.

Picture: Audio: Extras:

native 4K. The detail apparent in the heroes' suits, for instance, is little short of wondrous.

The UHD BD also features aggressive use of HDR and expanded colour. Inky blacks nestle alongside extreme peak whites, suggesting this is another DC title that's been mastered to 4,000-nit peaks.

Although the packaging doesn't mention it, *Justice League* flies onto 4K Blu-ray in both Dolby Vision and HDR10 iterations. Dolby Vision's baked-in dynamic metadata enhances the visuals with an expanded range and greater colour finesse. Yet the HDR10 version is also a sight for sore eyes.

Only some obviously sub-4K visual effects take the shine of an impressive presentation. **Audio:** The film comes with a Dolby Atmos mix that serves up no shortage of effects flying around the soundstage, and has a low-end that packs a wallop worthy of Superman. But when it comes to the type of discrete height details that mark out the very best Atmos mixes, outside of a couple of sequences, **Justice League** simply appears unable (or unwilling) to deliver the goods.

Still, it boasts much greater dynamic range than *Thor: Ragnarok*'s soundtrack (see #284), so it has that in its favour.

**Extras:** As you might expect, there's nothing in the extra features selection concerning *Justice League*'s troubled production. Instead we get two deleted scenes relating to missing hero Superman; four scene breakdowns; and six featurettes investigating the characters, production design and comic book history of the League.

# The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms: Premium Collection

Warner Bros. → All-region BD & R2 DVD £15 (HMV exclusive)



An atomic test at the North Pole unleashes a prehistoric monster which quickly heads off to wreak havoc in New

York City in this vintage creature-feature. The first of this month's double-header of dino-tastic Ray Harryhausen classics, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* crawls onto Blu-ray with a good-looking 1.37:1 1080p encode that is only held back by the nature of the film's optical effects. While there are no new extras, we do get the handful of goodies that appeared on the film's old DVD release.



# **Damnation Allev**

Signal One → Region B BD & R2 DVD



Released in the same year as *Star Wars* by the same studio, this postapocalyptic road-trip feels like the product of

a completely different era in filmmaking. Closer in tone and style to a Bert I. Gordon B-movie (only none of them were ever this tedious), it's a string of missed opportunities. The fact that barely a single scene goes by without some sort of optical effect also ensures that it looks pretty rough on Blu-ray – although the DTS-HD MA 6.1 mix does a fair job of replicating the original 'Sound360' soundtrack. Illuminating extras include two chat-tracks and three interviews.



# The Valley of Gwangi: Premium Collection

Warner Bros. → All-region BD & R2 DVD £15 (HMV exclusive)



Cowboys and dinosaurs clash in this enjoyable genre mash-up that serves as yet another showcase for stop-

motion effects pioneer Ray Harryhausen, and here his wonderful creations are joined on screen by an engaging cast who make the most of the film's *King Konglike* story. Given that the Dynamation technique used to bring the creatures to life means they'll never look perfect, the 2K scan that underpins this HD release holds up rather well (the dinosaur models have certainly never looked better). Bonus features, though, are disappointingly slim.

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# Murder on the Orient Express [4K]

Twentieth Century Fox → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £30



While this UHD Blu-ray release can do nothing about the narrative flaws in the recent all-star adaptation

of the classic whodunnit, it certainly does wonders for the film's lavish production design. Shot on 65mm at 2.40:1 and finished on a 4K DI, this UHD Blu-ray's 2160p encode is nothing less than stunning, with the considered use of HDR grading adding an extra level of opulence. The upgrade to Dolby Atmos audio is another big plus point for the platter, bringing noticeable height and depth to the soundstage.





# The Buck stops right here...

Kitsch sci-fi series makes for an enjoyable blast from the past on Blu-ray

# → BUCK ROGERS IN THE 25TH CENTURY: THE COMPLETE SERIES

In 1987 NASA launches the last of its deep-space probes, piloted by Captain William 'Buck' Rogers. A freak accident results in the ship being thrown off course and Buck being perfectly preserved in suspended animation, only to be found and awoken 500 years later, when he returns to a world he barely recognises or understands.

The second and best of producer Glen A. Larson's attempts to cash-in on the success of *Star Wars* on the smallscreen (the first being *Battlestar Galactica*), *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* is a blast of late 1970s sci-fi fun packed full of disco design, skin-tight costumes, cute robots and an endless parade of guest stars (including Jack Palance, Jamie Lee Curtis and pretty much the entire rogues' gallery from the '60s *Batman* TV series).

It's also surprisingly cheeky, never taking itself too seriously and serving up the largest number of double entendres outside of a Carry On... flick.

Sadly, the second (and last) season's attempt to shake up the formula sees things take a something of a nosedive. Yet even then the show still has the flirty onscreen chemistry shared by

leads Gil Gerrard (Buck) and Erin Gray (Colonel Wilma Deering) to fall back on.



**Picture:** Despite being based on Universal's preexisting broadcast HD masters, with no additional clean-up work undertaken for this release, *Buck...* looks surprisingly good on Blu-ray. Presented in their original 1.37:1 aspect ratios, the 1080p encodes are vibrant and detailed, with excellent contrast and black levels. The various optical effects shots knock it down a step, looking understandably softer and showing a less refined grain structure.

Audio: The LPCM 2.0 stereo sounds as good as you could hope for. While there's really not much in the way of discrete L/R effects, the all-important dialogue and music elements are perfectly presented without any damage or distortion.

Extras: The only extras on offer are the theatrical release version of original TV movie The Awakening (with its 'sexy' title credits sequence), plus alternate syndicated presentations of the two-part stories Flight of the War Witch and Journey to Oasis.





# HCC VERDICT

Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: The Complete Series

→ Fabulous Films → All-region BD

WE SAY: The show looks great in HD, but a few more extras would have been welcome.

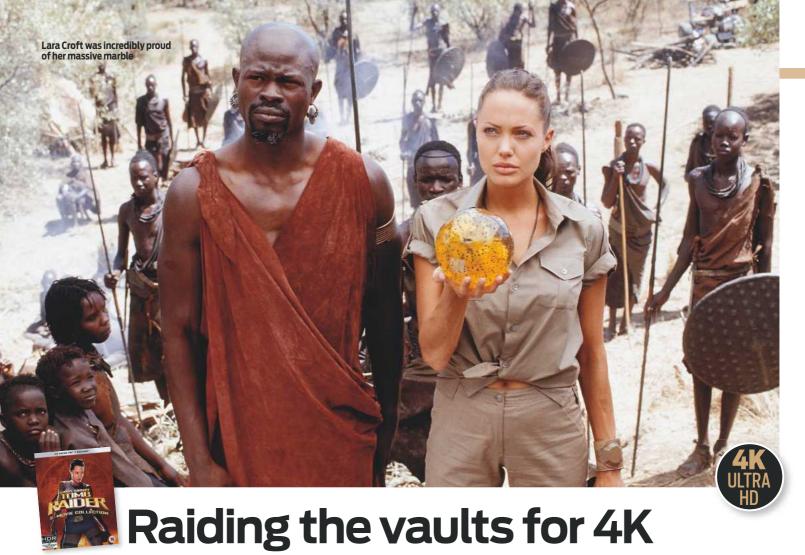
Movie: \*\*\*

Picture: \*\*

Audio: \*\*

Extras: \*

OVERALL: \*\*



Paramount dusts off a couple of Angelina Jolie action movies for a Dolby Vision upgrade





# HCC VERDICT

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider – 2-Movie Collection

→ Paramount → UHD Blu-ray & All-region BD → £50

WASNY A couple of forgettable, if inoffensive, action movies given inconsistent 4K transfers.

Movie:
Picture:
Audio:
Extras:

# → Lara Croft: Tomb Raider - 2-Movie Collection

Re-released on 4K Blu-ray to coincide with the recent resurrection of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, these two Angelina Jolie vehicles both fit equally well into the 'better than your average game-based film but still rather forgettable' box. Neither is a giant of the action-adventure genre, and while Jolie has the onscreen charisma the character demands, the plots for both movies have all the finesse and intrigue of... well, something based on a computer game.

**Picture:** For this 4K upgrade, Paramount delivers HDR10 and Dolby Vision encodes of both titles. It's just a shame neither looks consistently brilliant in either iteration.

2001's Lara Croft: Tomb Raider is the most frustrating in this regard. Some shots (especially daylight exteriors and contrastrich close-ups) are breathtakingly good, with scads of detail, while others are soft and slightly grubby.

The cautious addition of HDR and wide colour to Simon West's original also leaves the imagery looking very natural; more so than Jan de Bont's 2003 sequel, which enjoys a slightly more aggressive HDR facelift. The baseline brightness level on the follow-up is comfortably higher, and peak highlights such as the reflections in Lara's eyes are more intense than pretty much anything in the first film's transfer.

There's a far less grainy look to the sequel's imagery too, suggesting that we're viewing an upscale of the 2K digital intermediate it received on its cinematic release. This more consistent 'finish' is welcome – but there are also areas where the second movie's transfer is worse than the first. The image generally feels softer and there aren't any moments where this 4K presentation suddenly takes your breath away. Colours sometimes look a little forced, too – although the Dolby Vision version finds a better balance, while delivering

more subtle light information in dark scenes.

It's especially effective in injecting extra
contrast during the film's climax.

Audio: These 4K platters forgo remixed Dolby Atmos or DTS:X tracks in favour of DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 efforts. Both are pretty decent, with a dynamic delivery, good levels of clarity and a fair amount of detail. Yet the first has a harshness to it, and neither give your subwoofer the sort of work-out you might expect with such action-oriented films.

Extras: The only extras included on the two UHD discs are commentaries from the relevant directors. The remainder of the archival extras for Lara Croft: Tomb Raider can be found on the accompanying 1080p platter, but those for sequel ... Cradle of Life are nowhere to be found — which may leave die-hard fans wanting to import the US version instead.

# The Avengers: Tunnel of Fear

Studiocanal → R2 DVD £18



A lot has been written about lost episodes of *Doctor Who*, but there are plenty of other TV shows that only exist

in an incomplete form. This DVD release of a rediscovered episode of *The Avengers* brings the tally of complete episodes from its first series up to three – and while *Tunnel of Fear* is hardly a lost classic, it offers a revealing look at the show's original incarnation and how removed it is from the version we know so well. As well as the 52-minute episode, the DVD also houses interviews, reconstructions and a 2016 audio adaptation of the story.



# JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Season 1

Manga Entertainment → Region B BD



This insanely popular anime series lives up to its name with a nutty multi-generational tale of the Joestar family

and their fight against the vampiric forces unleashed by an ancient stone mask. This three-disc Blu-ray set collects the first two story arcs – *Phantom Blood* and *Battle Tendency* – across 26 episodes of crazy characters, violence and shouting (trust us: it's a lot more enjoyable than it sounds). The set's colourful 1.78:1 1080p encodes are partnered by raucous LPCM 2.0 mixes – just do yourself a favour and steer clear of the terrible US dubs.



# **Blood Harvest**

88 Films → All-region BD



Tiny Tim (of *Tiptoe Through the Tulips*fame) stars in this
low-budget slasher
curio from 1987. There's

an odd atmosphere to *Blood Harvest* that makes it strangely compelling, despite the awful acting and clunky plotting. Heavily cut by the BBFC when originally released, this Blu-ray presents the film in its full gory glory via a gloriously grainy HD transfer of the director's 'original 16mm vault elements'. Extras include behind-the-scenes footage and a lengthy home movie of Tiny Tim performing with the Great American Circus in 1987.

 $\star\star\star\star\star$ 

# Slaughterhouse Rock

88 Films → Region B BD



A young man drags his friends to Alcatraz after being tormented by nightmares linked to the prison island.

There he teams up with the ghost of a rock star (played by Toni Basil) to stop the demon who has possessed his brother. As wonderfully daft as this sounds, *Slaughterhouse Rock* ends up less than the sum of its parts. However, if you're in the mood for a spot of dumb late '80s horror, then this Blu-ray's 1.78:1 1080p encode does the best it can with the film's gloomy visuals, while the LPCM 2.0 audio sounds rather good with the Devo-tastic soundtrack.



# A celebration of saints and sinners

The BFI shines a light on the early films of Derek Jarman with this handsome new boxset

# → Jarman: Volume One 1972-1986

Fans of avant-garde cinema will find it hard to resist this boxset collecting together the first six feature films by uncompromising British artist, filmmaker and activist Derek Jarman.

Recounting the tale of St. Sebastian's martyrdom, Jarman's debut feature *Sebastiane* (1976) shocked audiences with its explicit homosexuality and violence. Joining it on the first platter is *In the Shadow of the Sun* (1981), a non-narrative tapestry of repurposed early '70s Super 8 home movies, all set to a soundtrack by Throbbing Gristle.

The remaining four films each get a Blu-ray disc to themselves. Featuring a young Adam Ant and Toyah Wilcox, punk classic *Jubilee* (1978) finds Queen Elizabeth I and occultist John Dee visiting the shattered Britain of the 1970s. Meanwhile, Shakespeare gets the punk treatment in Jarman's take on *The Tempest* (1979).

The Angelic Conversation (1985) is another of his non-narrative visual collages, this time with Judi Dench reading Shakespearean sonnets over the top. Finally, Caravaggio (1986) features Nigel Terry, Dexter Fletcher, Sean Bean and Tilda Swinton in a (wilfully anachronistic) fictionalised re-telling of the life of the 16th Century painter.

**Picture:** All six features have been newly scanned and restored in 2K from original film elements for this release – although the actual quality of the 1080p presentations varies significantly depending on the source materials. Shot on 35mm and framed at 1.85:1, the real standout here is *Caravaggio*.



Sebastiane, Jubilee and The Tempest also hold up very well, although their 16mm origins naturally result in a much coarser

and more prevalent grain structure. Despite being sourced from 16mm and 35mm materials respectively, *In the Shadow of the Sun* and *The Angelic Conversation* are at the mercy of the distressed, lower-res source material.

**Audio:** All the films in the set bar one are graced by modest LPCM mono soundtracks. *The Angelic Conversation* breaks from this with a surprisingly dynamic LPCM stereo track that serves as a fun counterpoint to the unusual visuals.

**Extras:** The BFI has collected a fine array of features including new and archival interviews; a selection of short films; film-specific image galleries; trailers; and even a look at two unfilmed Jarman projects. Rounding out the package is an exclusive 80-page book of writing about the movies.





# **HCC VERDICT**

Jarman: Volume One 1972 - 1986

⇒ BFI ⇒ Region B BD ⇒ £70

WESAY: The BFI celebrates a unique filmmaker in style with this packed boxset. Roll on Volume Two...

Movie: \*\*

Picture: \*\*

Audio: \*\*

Extras: \*\*

OVERALL: \*\*



# Prolific director hits the big 100

Milke Takashi shows no signs of slowing down with this slice of samurai cinema

# → BLADE OF THE IMMORTAL

When his sister is killed by a gang of 100 men seeking the bounty on his head, rogue samurai Manji (Kimura Takuya) slays them all, but is mortally wounded in the process. As he lies dying, Manji is visited by a mysterious old woman who infects him with 'blood worms' that repair his injuries - and in the process condemn him to everlasting life. Five decades later the reclusive Manji is tracked down by Rin (Sugisaki Hana), a young girl who seeks his help in killing the group of samurai who murdered her father.

Touted as director Milke Takashi's 100th film (the actual number is very tricky to gauge), Blade of the *Immortal* finds him teaming up with producer Jeremy Thomas for a third samurai film – this time based on a popular manga series. It doesn't reach the same heights as 2010's sublime 13 Assassins, but is still a magnificent action movie.

Book-ended by audacious fight scenes that pit its hero against hordes of enemies, the bulk of the film essentially boils down to a series of one-on-one scraps between Manji and increasingly grotesque foes. This episodic structure is its biggest failing, but has no doubt been inherited from the source material. Even so, the ensuing swordplay is exhilarating – and when the film draws all of its various threads together, it throws in an extra twist or two, making you reassess your opinions of key characters in unexpected ways.

Sombre yet exciting, thoughtful yet actionpacked, Blade of the Immortal is another triumph for one of Japan's most exciting filmmakers. Here's to his next 100...



Picture: Blade of the Immortal hacks and slashes its way onto Blu-ray with a sharply-rendered 2.40:1 1080p encode. Following the black-and-white opening sequence, it transitions to colour and fills the screen with richly-saturated primaries (particularly reds). Clarity is also excellent, revealing finely wrought environmental textures and intricate details in costume fabrics.

**Audio:** A DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix serves up plenty of zippy effects during the big fights, but is otherwise a fairly front-heavy affair that prefers to use the surrounds for more subtle, ambient effects. Music and dialogue are both rendered flawlessly. **Extras:** An impressive array of extras from Arrow Video. There's an interview with the director; a commentary by critic Tom Mes; two featurettes about shooting the opening and closing fights; 85-minutes of cast interviews; the trailer; a stills gallery; and a booklet of essays.





Hard to believe this film comes from the director responsible for Visitor Q

# HCC VERDICT

Arrow Video - Region B BD

A fantastic samurai film from Miike Takashi given a superb showing on Blu-ray.

Movie: Picture: Audio: Extras: OVERALL: 🗙 🗙 🖈

# Legend of the Mountain

Eureka! The Masters of Cinema Series Region B BD & R2 DVD → £18



A young scholar tasked with translating a Buddhist sutra finds himself the target for ghostly forces in King Hu's 1979 supernatural masterpiece. Finally available to own in

its original 192-minute cut, Legend of the Mountain has been newly restored in 4K from a first-generation interpositive for this Blu-ray release and the 2.40:1 Full HD encode offers a beautiful rendering of the films' atmospheric photography – although a frequent teal-bias results in some rather milkylooking blacks. Informative extras include two video essays about the movie and its director, plus a 32-page booklet.



# One-Armed **Swordsman**

88 Films → Region B BD



A landmark release in the history of Chinese cinema, the box office success of this 1969 Shaw Brothers film

ushered in a new, more violent and bloody style of wuxia swordplay movies. Despite issues revolving around colour registration and clarity (not all of which are source-related), the 2.35:1-framed 1080p presentation offered up by this UK Blu-ray is watchable and on a par with HD incarnations of similar films of this vintage. A commentary by Bey Logan and a chat with genre buff David West make for worthwhile extras.

# The Final Master

Cine Asia → Region B BD



The power struggle for control of the martial arts schools in the city of Tianjin during the 1930s is

turned into something altogether more confusing in director Xu Haofeng's needlessly muddled period thriller. Still, as baffling as the film may get at times, its fight scenes are never less than gripping and will ensure you stick with it. This Blu-ray not only delivers a kick-ass 2.40:1 Full HD encode, but unlike the same label's earlier Wolf Warrior II Blu-ray (reviewed in HCC #283) it serves up a lossless (DTS-HD MA) 5.1 Mandarin soundtrack.







Wisdom P4i In-ceiling speakers. We have eight in our Cinema showroom.



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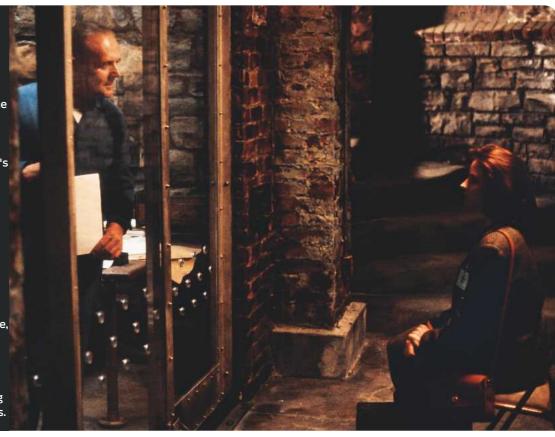
# Best Picture winners

With the Oscar-winning The Shape of Water now available to import on 4K Blu-ray, Team HCC rounds up 20 other movies that have grabbed the top prize at the Academy Awards...

# THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS

Over the 90-year history of the Academy Awards, only six horror films have ever been nominated for Best Picture - and the only one to go on and win it is this 1991 psychological chiller. Based on the bestselling novel by Thomas Harris, director Jonathan Demme's hair-raising film revolves around the game of cat and mouse that plays out between FBI trainee Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) and incarcerated serial killer Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). Easily deserving of its modern classic status.

Get it: While the film has been available on Blu-ray for some time, the MPEG-2 encode left much to be desired. Thankfully, The Criterion Collection came to the rescue earlier this year with a Region A-locked US disc boasting a new 4K scan and copious extras.





# BEN-HUR

Charlton Heston stars in this 1959 Biblical epic about a Jewish prince who is betrayed by a childhood friend and sent to work as a slave on a Roman galley, only to escape and return home with revenge on his mind. Culminating in a jawdropping chariot race, Ben-Hur is one of the grandest, most spectacular films ever made.

Get it: The 'Ultimate Collector's Edition' released in the US in 2011 partners the same all-region BD available in other territories with an art book and a reproduction of Heston's journal from the shoot.



# **MIDNIGHT COWBOY**

The only film with an 'X' rating to ever win the Best Picture Oscar, 1969's Midnight Cowboy tells the story of a naive wannabe cowboy (Jon Voight) who ends up turning tricks in New York City and the friendship he strikes up with an ailing con-man (Dustin Hoffman). A difficult but fascinating watch, and one of the key parts in the development of the New Wave cinema that would come to the fore in Hollywood in the 1970s.

Get it: A new 4K restoration of the film makes its UK Blu-ray debut on May 28, courtesy of Criterion.



# THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI

Alec Guinness, William Holden and Jack Hawkins star in this 1957 WWII drama about British prisoners of war forced to build a railway bridge across the river Kwai by their Japanese captors. What follows is a gripping clash of principles and discipline, realised by undisputed master of the bigscreen epic, David Lean.

Get it: Sony's Ultra HD BD looks great and packs remixed Atmos audio.



# No Country for **OLD MEN**

Having almost done it with Fargo in 1997, filmmaking siblings Joel and Ethan Coen finally nabbed the Best Picture award 11 years later with this nihilistic, noir-tinged neo-Western based on the novel

of the same name by Cormac McCarthy.

> Get it: Disney's Region A-locked US Collector's Edition has the most extras, but if that's not an option then the UK disc still looks and sounds superb.



# THE STING

In 1973, four years after headlining Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid, Paul Newman and Robert Redford reunited with director George Roy Hill for this frothy con artist thriller, hoodwinking Robert Shaw's mob boss – and the audience – as they set about making off with \$500,000. An intricate plot, evocative period setting and fabulous soundtrack (featuring Scott Joplin's rag-time classic The Entertainer) make it a pitch-perfect movie.

**Get it:** Universal's Blu-ray, now available for under £10, offers a pleasing DTS-HD 5.1 mix and so-so image quality.



# CASABLANCA

Arguably the greatest love story ever committed to the silver screen, Michael Curtiz's 1952 masterpiece is one of those movies that you can put on at any time and get sucked into watching all the way through again. As the famous misquote goes, 'Play it again, Sam...'

**Get it:** The HMV-exclusive Premium Collection BD supports its stunning 4K restoration with countless bonus bits. If that's not extravagant enough, you could import the US 70th Anniversary Gift Set, which includes coasters and a faux-leather keepsake box.



# IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT

Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert star in this 1934 precursor to the screwball comedy from director Frank Capra. Colbert plays a spoilt socialite on the run from her disapproving father and Gable the out-of-work reporter who sees a juicy story in helping reunite her with her husband. Quick-witted and fast-moving, it was the first film to ever win the 'Big Five' Oscars (Picture, Director, Actor, Actress and Writing) — a feat matched by only two others.

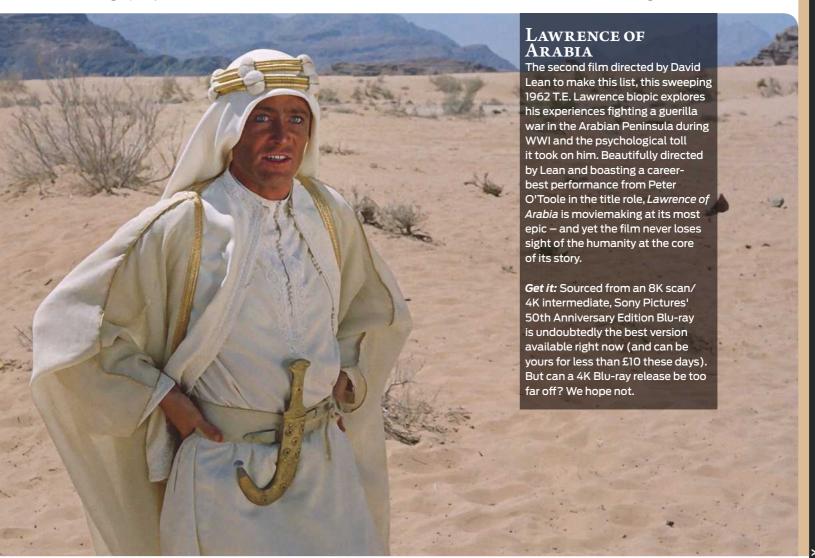
**Get it:** Based on a 4K restoration, the Criterion Collection Blu-ray is the definitive version.



# **TITANIC**

James Cameron's 1997 box office sensation retells the story of the sinking of the R.M.S. Titanic from the point of view of two young lovers from very different social backgrounds – Leonardo DiCaprio's penniless artist Jack and Kate Winslet's posh totty Rose. As ghastly as that sounds, Cameron comes good with his staging of the disaster itself, which pulls out all of the stops to immerse you in the chaos.

**Get it:** Pick up Fox's four-disc 3D Collector's Edition for the chance to savour the film's surprisingly effective stereoscopic conversion, along with a boat-load of extras.





# Platoon

The most visceral part of Oliver Stone's Vietnam war trilogy, this 1986 drama witnesses the horror and idiocy of the US ground war through the eyes of Chris (Charlie Sheen), a young grunt caught between rival factions in his platoon. Uncomfortably brutal at times, but Stone is on a mission here, and his impressive ensemble cast and rich imagery leave you in no doubt as to what it is.

**Get it:** Platoon was given a 25th anniversary Blu-ray release in 2011 – and the best news is that it ported over a wealth of extras (including Stone's commentary track) from previous DVD editions.



# **Che Apartment**

Billy Wilder's brilliant 1960 dramedy sees low-level insurance clerk C.C. 'Bud' Baxter (Jack Lemmon) letting company executives use his apartment to carry out their extramarital affairs, in the hope it well net him a promotion. But things become tricky when Baxter falls for an elevator operator (Shirley MacLaine) who, unbeknownst to him, is one of his bosses' lovers...

**Get it:** Released at the end of last year, Arrow Video's Limited Edition Blu-ray boasts a new restoration and a superb collection of extras.



# THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE RETURN OF THE KING

There's a sense that the Academy was rewarding Peter Jackson's entire Tolkien project when it celebrated this fantasy epic in 2003 – it's not the best of the trilogy and is in need of a tighter edit. Still, this remains a prime slice of big-budget filmmaking.

**Get it:** With the Extended Edition trilogy Blu-ray boxset now deleted, you may as well invest in the 30-disc Extended *Hobbit/LotR* megabox and set aside an entire weekend to digest it all.



# The Sound of Music

With its unforgettable mixture of nuns and Nazis set to some of musical writing team Rogers and Hammerstein's very best work, it's no surprise that *The Sound of Music* is one of the best-loved Hollywood musicals of all time.

Get it: Fans should hunt for a copy of the 'Limited Collector's Set' that hit the US back in 2010. On top of the same beautifully restored Blu-ray that is available on these shores, it adds the CD soundtrack, a reproduction 1965 souvenir programme, a 100-page scrapbook and a 'My Favourite Things' music box.







# Gone with the Wind

Another cinematic 'epic' – this 1939 Civil War era romance/drama runs for nearly four hours – and the highest-earning flick ever at the box office once inflation is taken into account. Everyone should watch it at least once.

Get it: Warner created a new master from an 8K scan for a 70th Anniversary BD release in 2009 – and this was used again for the current (2014) release. Heaps of extras on the two-disc UK BD, but you'll find even more on the four-disc US version.



# THE FRENCH CONNECTION

William Friedkin gave the police thriller a shot of adrenaline with this relentless (and ultimately extremely influential) 1971 drama about tough-as-nails narcotics detectives, played by Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider, tracking a French drug smuggler on the mean streets of New York.

**Get it:** It may have been approved by the director, but the revisionist look of Fox's initial Blu-ray was downright weird. A 'remastered' (ie: corrected) version was finally issued as a UK steelbook in 2014.



#### On the Waterfront

Marlon Brando gave one of the most electrifying performances of his career in this powerful and uncompromising 1954 critique of union corruption set around the New York City docks.

Get it: With its solid AV credentials, the Sony Pictures UK Blu-ray coulda been a contender, but falls short of the Region A-locked Criterion disc, which offers a choice of three aspect ratios and extra bonus features.



#### **GLADIATOR**

Ridley Scott rebooted his career (and the historical epic genre) in 2000 with this gripping, muscular drama. Russell Crowe excels as the Roman soldier-turned-slave with vengeance on his mind.

Get it: Universal's 2009 BD debut for Gladiator was a travesty of obvious edge enhancement and digital smoothing, a situation rectified by a re-release a year later. Coming this April is an Ultra HD platter that hopefully won't open a whole new can of picture quality worms.

MAY 2018 HOME CINEMA CHOICE

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#### **TOP 10** Televisions











Sony KD-65ZD9→£3,000 \*\*\*\* Sony finished 2016 on a high with this full-array LED Bravia (with advanced local dimming tech) that claims a 1,800-nit peak brightness and DV support. Cinematic, sublime pictures – the 100in version [HCC #282] is even more impressive. HCC #267 Sony KD-55A1→£2,800 ★★★★

Another Sony set due a Dolby Vision upgrade, this 55in OLED dazzles with its image quality (including superb motion processing), hidden Acoustic Surface speaker technology and eye-catching styling. HCC #275



LG OLED65E7

→£3,800 **★★★★**★ 3D playback is dropped, but the E7 offers welcome picture improvements over last year's E6, particularly brightness and near-black talents.

Supports Dolby Vision.

HCC #274



Panasonic TX-55EZ952 →£2,000 ★

A 55in OLED TV with an effortlessly naturalistic performance, although not as bright as some rivals. Gorgeous, understated design and premium build quality. HCC #277



Philips 55POS9002 →£2,000 \*\*\*

Philips' second-gen Android-powered OLED takes a more refined approach to its processing, focusing on balanced cinematic imagery. Ambilight, as usual, boosts your immersion. HCC #276



Samsung UE49MU7000

→£750 Not one of Samsung's top-flight TVs, but a cracking mid-range 49in model that presents 4K and HD material with bright, rich colours and stable blacks. Good choice for an affordable setup.



Samsung QE65Q9F

→£3,500 ★★★ This premium 'QLED' screen outguns rivals when it comes to brightness and visual impact. Routinely stunning, but edge LED lighting has some niggles. Supports Samsung's HDR 10+ format. HCC #273



Sonv KD-55XE8596

→£900 \*\*\*\*

A real 4K bargain, combining a 55in screen with a solid picture performance. HDR doesn't zing due to a lack of sheer brightness, but it benefits from backlight stability. Impressive with regular HD, too. HCC #278



Panasonic TX-65EX750

÷£1,500 ★★★★ A (surprise!) 3D-capable LED screen that offers well-controlled backlighting, pleasing 4K clarity and good HD upscaling. Not the brightest around, and some colour inconsistencies.



**LG 55SJ850V** 

HCC #277

→£900 **★★★★** 

Backlight distractions hinder this set's performance in low-lit rooms, but it's a strong all-rounder, offering Dolby Vision HDR, WebOS smarts, well-rounded sonics and a bargain price tag. HCC #276

#### TOP 5 Blu-ray movies



#### **Blade Runner 2049** [Ultra HD Blu-ray]

A smart, evocative sequel that proves worth the wait, and blessed on Warner's US 4K platter with a pin-sharp image and spine-tingling Dolby Atmos soundmix. HCC #283 \*\*\*\*



#### **Death of Stalin**

More superb political satire from Armando 'In The Loop' lannucci. Entertainment One's BD may be light on extras, but the chattrack is well worth a listen, and DTS-HD 5.1 audio works well with the source material. HCC #283



HCC #279

#### Only the Brave

Josh Brolin stars in this powerful drama about wildfire-fighters in the American southwest, which burns bright on BD courtesy of an excellent 1080p image and even more impressive DTS-HD MA 5.1 track. HCC #284



#### Paddington 2 [Ultra HD Blu-ray]

A seguel that's better than its forebear (if you pardon the pun), Paddington 2 is sweet, funny and its 4K HDR presentation shows a clear improvement over its SDR counterpart. HCC #283



#### Coco [Ultra HD Blu-ray]

\*\*\*\*

Pixar returns to form with this quirky tale of a boy trapped in the Land of the Dead. The Atmos track isn't a standout effort, but the 4K visuals on this US import are gorgeous, and there are some fun extras. HCC #284



#### TOP 10 Blu-rays







#### Oppo UDP-203 →£650 ★★★★

Oppo refreshes its player hardware with a superb universal design with Ultra HD playback (including Dolby Vision via firmware update). Packed with user adjustments and connectivity. No apps or Darbee processing, though. HCC #269







#### Oppo UDP-205→£1,400 ★★★★★

This pricey, peerless UHD deck flaunts universal disc playback, asynchronous USB input, headphone amp and balanced stereo outs amongst its audiophile features. One for musos.





#### Sony UBP-X800

→£270 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-rav with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. HCC #274



#### Panasonic DMP-UB900

The Ultra HD Blu-ray format got an inspiring debut in Panasonic's multi-talented deck that offers a sterling picture performance, 4K-enabled VOD apps and analogue audio outs. No DV. HCC #259



#### Sony UBP-X700

→£250 **★★★★** 

A compact player promised a DV update this Summer, the UBP-X700 has a nondescript design, no analogue outs and a stubby remote. But it plays great, and offers SACD support. HCC #284



#### Cambridge Audio CXUHD

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used.



#### Panasonic DMP-UB700

→£300 ★★★>

Shorn of some of the audiophile niceties of the UB900 (including multichannel analogue outputs), but still a safe pair of hands with your 4K BDs. And at a bargain price. HCC #270





#### Panasonic DMP-UB300

→£130 ★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain deck, but you might prefer to up your budget for the UB700 – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. HCC #272



#### Samsung UBD-K8500

→£180 ★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. HCC #260



#### Samsung UBD-M9500

→£230 ★★★★

HCC #279

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback cápability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. HCC #275

# Starscape Fibre Optic Lighting

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Photo courtesy of Gary J.Fernandez Limited

#### **TOP 10** Projectors



#### Sony VPL-VW760ES→£15,000 ★★★★★

This premium beamer adds laser illumination to Sony's 4K SXRD projection technology, and the results are staggering. It's not super-bright, but images are detailed, vivid and supremely well-balanced. Worthy of flagship status. HCC #283



#### JVC DLA-X5900→£4,000 ★★★★

An outstanding performer at this price point. JVC's latest D-ILA model may lack native 4K silicon but its eShift 4K engine shows real improvement and HDR playback has been greatly boosted too. A compelling home cinema PJ. HCC #282



## **Sony VPL-VW360ES**→£7,000 ★★★★

In Sony's 4K range between the laser-based VW760ES and entry-level 260ES you'll find this accomplished beamer. Excellent imagery with both SDR and HDR. Motorised controls. HCC #284



#### Optoma UHD60 →£2,400 ★★★1

HCC #277

An assured Ultra HD debut from Optoma – the UHD60 presents 4K Blu-rays with a pleasing contrast balance and lush detail. SDR-HDR conversion tool is best avoided, though.



#### Optoma UHZ65

→£5,000 ★★★★
The asking price here reflects
Optoma's addition of laser
illumination (yielding
improved contrast and far
greater 'lamp' life) to the
DLP 4K and HDR playback
talents of its stablemates.
HCC #282



#### Acer VL7860

→£3,500 ★★★★
Laser 4K DLP projector that
misses out on the contrast
performance of some
models, but undercuts them
in terms of pricing. Use the
Silent mode for whisperquiet operation.



#### Epson EH-TW6700

→£1,300 ★★★★ HDR and 4K scaling are off the menu, leaving this mid-range model to concentrate on cinematic HD images. Bright, crisp performance, plenty of tweaks, but no 12V trigger. HCC #271



#### Sony VPL-VW260ES

>£5,200 \*\*\*\*

Sony's base-level 4K PJ comes with a few strings attached (brightness and colour range are limited), but it's a tempter for anyone speccing a UHD theatre.



#### Epson EH-TW7300

→£2,200 ★★★★
Similar performance traits
to its bigger EH-TW9300
sibling, but with reductions in
max brightness (and claimed
contrast). 4K upscaler, rather
than native, with HDR
playback. HCC #269



#### BenO W1050

HCC #284

→£500 **★★★★**★

There are a few cut corners on this budget DLP 1080p model (no backlight on the remote, no lens shift, a meagre zoom), but overall movie performance is good for the money.

# **Award-winning home cinemas**

HCC #280

At Cyberhomes our home cinemas and smart home installations aren't just about the amazing 4K picture and immersive Dolby Atmos® sound. We also implement the acoustic treatments, lighting control, seating, ISF calibration, the intuitive Savant Pro or Control4 control system, and so much more.







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Home cinema design and installation • Lighting control systems Multi-room audio and video • Home automation

#### **TOP 10** Speakers





#### Monitor Audio Gold 300AV →£7,150 ★★★★

MA revamps its Gold Series and we pay serious attention. This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/ monopole FX surrounds. HCC #251





#### Wharfedale DX-2 → £450 ★★★★★

The asking price of this 5.1 system will tell you it doesn't deliver the last word in surround sound fidelity, but Wharfedale's package is compact, well-made and faultlessly delivers on its home-cinema-on-a-budget promise. HCC #283



#### **KEF R Series 7.1**

→£6,500 **★★★★** 

A 7.1 set mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. HCC #217



KEF Q Series 5.1.2

→£3300 ★★★ KEF's revamped Q Series now offers Atmos modules for an up-to-the-minute sonic experience. Big, bold-looking speakers. Robust,

immersive audio. HCC #280



#### **ATC HTS7 5.1**

→£3,500 **★★★★** 

Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet ÁV setups. HCC #275



**Monitor Audio Silver 500 5.1** 

→£3,650 ★★★★

The new Silver range offers a potent EQ-able sub, sweet design, dipole surrounds and largescale, nuanced sonics. Atmos upfiring models would be nice, though. *HCC #282* 



Wharfedale Diamond 11

**HCP**→£800 ★★★↑

Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. HCC #279



**DALI Opticon 5.1** 

→£3,200 \*\*\*\*

The Opticons employ driver designs from DALI's highend models, and showcase a talent for involving music presentation and thrilling home cinema. HCC #260



Q Acoustics 7000i 5.1 Slim

£1.000 \*\*

Consistent tonality and detail retrieval are the standout elements here, joined by a cute, easy-to-accommodate design – particularly the 7060S sub. HCC #284



Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos

**5.1.2** →£1,200 ★★★★★

Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfirers in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. HCC #276

# Starscape Fibre Optic Lighting

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Photo courtesy of Gary J.Fernandez Limited

#### **TOP 10** AV Receivers/AV Processors





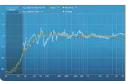


**Denon AVR-X6400H** → £2,100 ★★★★

This receiver's 11 channels of power are joined by Atmos, DTS:X and integrated Auro-3D, plus HEOS multiroom integration, making it peerlessly flexible. Sound delivery is quick-footed and articulate. A superb one-box solution. HCC #280







Arcam AVR850→£4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos (and future DTS:X) support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ. 11-channel pre-outs for full-fat setups. HCC #257



#### Anthem MRX 1120 →£4,000 ★★★★★

Combining Anthem's superb ARC room EQ system with 11-channel amplification makes this an essential consideration for full-spec Atmos setups. Muscular, precise sound. But no networking skills. HCC #265



#### Marantz NR1608

→£600 **★★★★**★ With a smoother sound

signature than before and the addition of HEOS multiroom, Marantz's 7.1-channel slim-line AVR flies the flag for living-room friendly AV. Only one HDMI out, though. HCC #278



#### Sony STR-DN1080 →£550 ★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2

sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. HCC #277



#### Marantz SR8012

→£2,700 ★★★★★

Marantz joins the 11-channel arms race with an AVR that benefits from a beefed-up power stage. As with the Denon X6400H, format support includes Auro-3D. Sophisticated sonics. HCC #284



#### Pioneer VSX-1131

→£550 **★★★★** 

Seven-channel model with Atmos and DTS:X support that features an overhauled remote control and UI to improve usability. Bass-rich, energetic sound. HCC #265



#### Marantz SR7012

→£1,700 ★★★★★

Nine-channel design (with 11.2 processing) for Atmos, DTS:X and Auro-3D configurations. Wellfeatured, and solid and sophisticated in use, but not an all-out action monster. HCC #282



#### Yamaha RX-A860

+£900 ★★★★

Only seven channels and hindered by only three HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMI inputs, but beyond that this flexible MusicCast AVR proves a great listen, with plenty of DSP toys. HCC #270



#### **Denon HEOS AVR**

→£800 \*\*\*\*

Able to run wireless rears/ sub (using HEOS models) and sporting a display-free design, this is a five-channel AVR with a different approach. One for HEOS devotees only. HCC #276

#### **Bonus features**



#### mother! The Downward Spiral

Darren Aronofsky's off-beat psychological chiller isn't for everyone, but this doc provides fascinating insight into the film's conception, planning and 16mm capture. HCC #282



#### Kingsman: Inside the **Golden Circle**

<del>\*\*\*</del>\*

A near two-hour doc. split into nine parts, is perhaps more than this hit-n-miss sequel deserves, but there's plenty of info and insight here into K2's production. HCC #283



#### Thor Ragnarok: Director's Commentary

Taika Waititi delivers an oddball. frequently hilarious chat track that fits this movie's anarchic nature well. A fine solo effort, albeit with an unexpected guest star... HCC #284

\*\*\*\*



#### Impressions: A Journey Behind the Scenes of Twin Peaks

Twin Peaks fans can delve deep into the recent series' production with this 291-minute fly-on-thewall Making of... doc that gets its own BD platter. HCC #281



#### You Must Remember This: The Warner Bros. Story

The 480i image isn't great, but this 289-minute film charting WB's rise to the top of Hollywood is a brilliant addition to the Casablanca: Premium Collection BD. HCC #284

\*\*\*\*





#### TOP 10 Subwoofers





SVS SB-2000 →£600 \*\*\*

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. HCC #233





**REL No.25**→£6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful.



**Bowers & Wilkins DB1D** 

→£3,750 ★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled perfect and the second sec controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. HCC #277



JL Audio Fathom f212v2

→£6,500 ★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. HCC #261



SVS SB16-Ultra

→£2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. HCC #270



**REL T7i** 

→£850 **★★★★** 

Easy to house 8in sub (with 10in passive driver). Decent LF extension joined by superb speed. Wireless transmission via optional (£200) system. HCC #277



SVS SB-4000

→£1,800 ★★★★

Similar in operation and styling to the SB16-Ultra flagship, but smaller and more affordable. Superior DSP results in a real sense of control. HCC #284



**BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF** 

→£475 \*\*\*

Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered. HCC #247



GoldenEar SuperSub X

£1,450 ★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. HCC #272



KEF Kube10b

→£600 \*\*\*\*

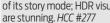
The middle option of KEF's new Kube range packs a 10in driver, 300W Class D amp and 56-bit DSP engine to maintain efficient lowfrequency control. HCC #283

#### Console games



#### **Uncharted: Lost Legacy**

The Drake brothers are replaced by two new heroines in the latest instalment of Sony's PlayStation puzzler. The open-world element hides the relatively short nature of its story mode; HDR visuals



\*\*\*\*



#### Call of Duty: WWII

\*\*\*\*

Eschewing the more fantastical elements of recent COD entries and giving greater emphasis to tactics and staying alive, this is a reminder of why the FPS franchise is so well loved. Superb sound FX, too. HCC #282



#### **Monster Hunter: World**

\*\*\*\*

This series breaks out of its Nintendo origins to offer PS4/ Xbox One owners varied, open-world gameplay, plus HDR and better-than-HD visuals that can be tailored to your desire. Monstrous fun. HCC #283



#### **Super Mario Odyssey**

Mario returns in this standout title for Nintendo's Switch console that endows its platforming fun with superior game mechanics, eye-popping visuals and a foot-tapping score. A genuine masterpiece. HCC #280



#### Injustice 2

Brilliant follow up to the 2013 superhero beat-em 'up classic, letting you dole out a good kicking to the bad guys while playing as DC Comics legends. Advanced resolution via PS4, plus HDR. HCC #275



#### **TOP 10** Accessories







#### KEF R50 →£600 ★★★★

KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice to beef up a system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. First-rate build. HCC #252







#### Yamaha WX-AD10→£150 ★★★★★

Simple to use, unobtrusive add-on that brings MusicCast multiroom/hi-res streaming to legacy AV gear via 3.5mm/phono. Not a bad price — only available in grey, unfortunately.





#### **Amazon Echo Dot**

→£50 ★★★★ Less impressive as a standalone speaker than its larger sibling, but more

larger sibling, but more affordable. Use its 3.5mm output and Bluetooth to pair with third-party kit. Fun Al experience. A real bargain. HCC #269



#### Nvidia Shield Android TV

→£180 ★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use. HCC #272



#### Roku Streaming Stick+

→£70 ★★★★★

If a simple life is your aim, this content-rich, 4K/HDR-capable dongle from the streaming specialist is your friend. Idiot-proof interface and control. Good price.



#### Amazon Fire TV (2017)

| →£70 ★★★★★

HDR playback has been added to Amazon's great-value media streamer, although the absence of an Ethernet port does niggle considering its 4K talents. Cluttered UI.



#### Panasonic SC-GA10

→£230 ★★★★★

Panasonic partners with Google Assistant for its debut smart speaker, and doesn't forget to focus on sonic power as well as Al fun. Pricier than many rivals, but still appealing.

HCC #284



#### Apple TV 4K

→£180 (32GB) ★★★★ With Apple's iTunes movie

vitir Apple's Holles movies store offering 4K HDR (Dolby Vision) movies at the same price as Full HD downloads, this compact media player (irritating handset aside) is sure to tempt.

HCC #284



#### **PSB** Imagine XA

→£350 ★★★★

These two-way Dolby Atmos-enabled upfiring speakers are fairly chunky, but work well at creating a height layer and the £350-per-pair ticket makes them an enticing option.



#### Xbox One X

→£450 **★★★★** 

The most advanced games console on the planet dazzles with its native 4K HDR gaming chops, but the price tag is hefty and heavyweight users may wish it came with more than 1TB of storage.

#### TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets



#### Blue Planet II

A fine 4K companion to the BBC's previous *Planet Earth II*, this set delivers seven episodes of expertly edited and informative natural history, with crisp, colour-rich HDR visuals and immersive audio. *HCC #283* 



### The Wonderful Worlds of Ray Harryhausen: Vol. Two

A trio of vintage flicks in a sumptuous package from Indicator. Here it's Mysterious Island, Jason and The Argonauts and First Men in the Moon given the deluxe treatment. HCC #281



## Harry Potter: 8-Film Collection [Ultra HD]

\*\*\*\*

Revised audio mixes accompany each title in Warner's mega-hit franchise, and 4K visuals impress, not least the earlier flicks that buff up well. No Full HD discs included, nor extras. HCC #282



#### Hammer Volume 2: Criminal Intent

Indicator again raids Hammer's library to dig up four black-and-white crime thrillers from the late '50s/early '60s. Extras include an alternate cut of 1961's Cash on Demand. HCC #284



### The Deuce: The Complete First Season

David Simon (*The Wire*) is the brains behind this evocative porn industry drama set in 1970s New York. This boxset offers quality AV and a couple of informative chat tracks. *HCC #284* 

\*\*\*\*



#### **TOP 10** Soundbars & Soundbases



#### Yamaha YSP-5600SW → £1,900 \*\*\*\*

With its 46 drivers (including upfirers) this premium 'bar delivers precisely-steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. HCC #254



#### Canton DM55→£330 ★★★★★

Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. HCC #260



#### Samsung HW-K950

→£1,300 **★★★★** Soundbar with additional

wireless rears and Dolby Atmos support via four upfiring drivers. Impressively largescale performance, good connectivity. No native DTS support. HCC #263



#### Samsung HW-MS750/ **SWA-W700**

→£700/£600 \*\*\*\* Upfiring drivers on this premium 'bar, but no Atmos decoding. Performance still dazzles, and the optional sub shows its merits with movie soundmixes. HCC #278



#### Sony HT-ST5000

→£1,500 ★★★★★

High-end Dolby Atmoscapable soundbar/sub. Upfirers elevate the soundstage (but don't wraparound). Sound quality overall is excellent, blending muscle and depth with musicality. HCC #275



#### Q Acoustics M3

→£300 ★★★★

A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. HCC #271



→£800 ★★★★★

The Danish speaker brand brings a slice of glamour to your setup with this stylish soundbar. No HDMI or digital decoding but it packs a tight, lively and nuanced sound.

HCC #269



#### **JBL Bar Studio**

→£150 ★★★★★

No subwoofer here, just a fairly compact stereo 'bar that offers a useful soundstage-widening 'Surround' mode, HDMI ARC connectivity, and a decent performance for the price. HCC #284



#### O Acoustics M2

→£300 **★★★★**★

Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/ built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. HCC #279



#### JBL Bar 5.1

→£650 \*\*\*\*

Switchable been stereo and 5.1 via battery-powered surround modules, this HDMI-toting package offers a cable-free multichannel solution. A 10in subwoofer underpins the soundfield. HCC #283

#### Back-catalogue Bl



#### **Charley Varrick**

Walter Matthau stars in and Don Siegel directs this superior 1973 bank robbery thriller, brought to UK Blu-ray by indie label Indicator. A great-looking Full HD transfer and excellent selection of extras. HCC #283





#### The Apartment

\*\*\*\*

Plenty of effort has gone into restoring this Billy Wilder comedy - the result is a new BD transfer that looks wonderfully sharp, well-contrasted and clean, considering the film's 1960 vintage. HCC #282



#### Night of the Living Dead

The Criterion Collection pleases fans of George A. Romero's genredefining 1968 horror with a labour-of-love two-disc BD release. Image quality benefits from a consistent 4K restoration; extras are plentiful. HCC #283

\*\*\*\*



#### **Suspiria: Limited Edition**

Dario Argento's 1977 classic receives a second UK Blu-rav. with a new 4K restoration making amends for the previous lacklustre effort from 2010. Plenty of worthwhile extras: 5.1 DTS-HD MA audio. HCC #282



#### Casablanca: Premium Collection

A fresh transfer (from a 4K scan), lossless audio and some new extras make this double-disc BD release for the much-loved war-time romance an essential purchase. HCC #284





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#### TOP 5 PVRs



#### Virgin Media TiVo, **£subscription**

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! - and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it





#### Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content



#### **Humax FVP-5000T**

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/ media iukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB





#### Humax DTR-T4000. **£subscription**

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

\*\*\*\*



#### **EE TV Smart Box £subscription**

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

\*\*\*\*

#### **TOP 5** Headphones



#### Sony MDR-HW700DS,

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb - great for late-night listening





#### Sony MDR-1000X, £360

Superior noise-cancelling cans with hi-res audio support via Sony's LDAC wireless transmission tech. Slick, touch-sensitive operation and healthy battery life. Fulsome sound and comfy to wear





#### 1More MK802, £150

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

\*\*\*\*



#### Bowers & Wilkins PX, £330

B&W adds noise-cancelling to the general spec of its previous P7 wireless cans, a welcome update for those seeking uninterrupted listening. Offers a neutral, balanced sound suited to both movies and music

\*\*\*\*



#### Audio Technica ATH-SR9,

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort: 3m cable should suit most AV setups

\*\*\*\*

#### **TOP 5** Wireless speakers



#### KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition, KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality





#### Sony SRS-X11, £60

An affordable palm-sized Bluetooth speaker with internal rechargeable battery, Sony's SRS-X11 is supremely portable and sounds decent for the money. A neat little gizmo. Get two and they can work in stereo \*\*\*\*



#### O Acoustics BT3, £280

Bluetooth stereo pair with optical input makes a good alternative to a soundbar (there's even a subwoofer pre-out) while remaining a dab hand at music. Neat and tidy design, good price



#### Simple Audio Listen, £400

Desktop stereo speakers with Bluetooth support, these benefit from separate tweeter/midbass units and a classy construction. Performance is well-balanced, and a subwoofer output is offered for extra bass

\*\*\*\*



#### Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

\*\*\*\*

# HOME CINEN



System selector AV setups for all budgets Building a boxset Tricks of the Blu-ray trade from the experts at the BFI

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#### → Reviews

Yamaha RX-A3070 AV receiver Acoustic Energy 100 Series 5.1 Hisense 55in U7 4K TV Bluesound Pulse soundbar Affordable 4K projector grouptest **PLUS** News, software, opinion, comps and more

CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



# AV Avenger

**Steve May** applauds the cinema owners who are using clever technology to ward off mobile phone users. Now he's wondering if he should move to France

**THESE DAYS, I** generally try and avoid going to the cinema. For one thing it's too stressful. Any excitement I feel at the prospect of catching a new movie (and generally I'm always excited) is mitigated by the thought of having my theatrical experience ruined by less-than-respectful cinema goers who are quite happy to chat, eat, laugh inappropriately and consult their smartphones as regularly as if they were outside the local pub.

Sometimes I can enjoy a bigscreen visit — mid-week in the afternoon when screens become delightfully empty — but for the most part I prefer to watch films in my own home cinema. At least here, family members respect the code. Mobile phone use warrants a hard stare, and a possible punishment Pause. I can also watch until the last credits have rolled, and not be taken out of the moment by dullards bolting for the exit as if their lives depended on it at the first sign that the film is finishing.

Another compelling reason to give theatres a miss is the often shoddy quality of presentation. From omnipresent house lights, to cleaning staff who'll barrel in before the presentation is over, I frequently leave irritated rather than inspired.

I do actually see a large number of movies in real cinemas, but more often than not it's at a media screening in a well-equipped preview theatre, or (if I'm really lucky) a special event at Dolby's joyously specc'd London HQ. This means I enjoy all the benefits of a theatrical viewing, without any of the pitfalls (apart from when a fellow scribe takes out a pen and paper to make notes). I am aware that this isn't an option open to everyone.

#### We're jammin'

Perhaps there's good news for cinema-goers from across the Channel. In Paris, some multiplexes have

installed smartphone signal blockers to combat the disruption caused by punters unable to resist the lure of Instagram for more than three minutes at a time.

Such jammers work by emitting a signal in the same frequency band that mobile phones use. There's naturally been speculation that turning theatres into an electromagnetic chamber is in some way unhealthy, but if it stops an oik texting next to me I'm all for it.

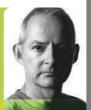
I reckon this policy should be mandatory everywhere. Annoying, then, that it's actually illegal to use jammers in cinemas and theatres in many countries. When the owners of the Savoy picture house in Dublin installed a mobile phone blocker back in 2003, they were threatened with a hefty €25,000 fine and even the prospect of jail by Ireland's communications regulator. In fact, the Savoy's initiative was prescient, recognising the scourge of smartphones before they even really took hold.

Communications watchdog Ofcom mandates that mobile phone jammers cannot be used legally in Britain. Its unhelpful suggestion is that people should instead be educated to keep their mobiles switched off instead. I'm not sure of the last time anyone from Ofcom went to their local multiplex, but educating the audience seems wistful at best.

France, however, likes to treat movies with almost religious respect. *Vive la France*!

Elsewhere, there have even been reports of phone-weary consumers taking matters into their own hands by using a portable jammer bought cheaply online. This, I suppose, is one solution. Another is to just stay at home and stock up on Pringles ■

Does your home cinema have any 'house rules'? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com Steve May has now built a dungeon under his home cinema, where he can throw anyone who reveals spoilers halfway through a movie



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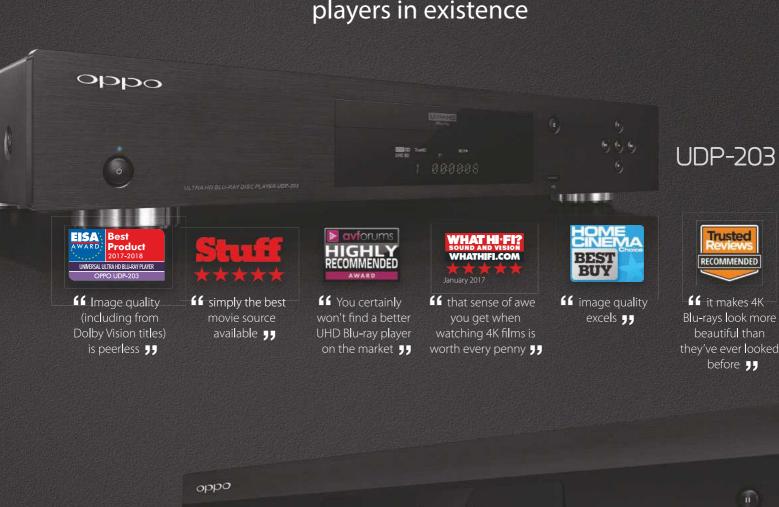
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